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IN THE SHADOW OF THE BUSH

A New Zealand Romance

BY

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IN THE SHADOW OF THE BUSH.

CHAPTER I.

IN one of the lately-settled bush districts of the Wellington Province, where the clearings were as yet comparatively few and of no very great extent—islands only as yet in the great sea of forest that stretched back for many miles over more or less broken country to the foot of the higher ranges, themselves forest clad—this story opens. Settlement had been advancing in this direction for some years, slowly at one time and more rapidly at another, but still steadily encroaching upon the unbroken region of bush. Occasionally a settler, or a community of settlers, more enterprising than others, would make a leap, as it were, far in advance of their comrades—a bolder dash upon the timbered foe, and take up an isolated position in the very heart of the enemy, only to be passed in turn and left behind, after a year or two, by the still advancing march of settlement.

Roads, as the term is generally understood, were for a time unknown. At first, a pathway through the bush or along the felled road line, diving, perhaps, now and again, into a deep gully, or skirting a slippery sideling, and barely passable for a horse; then a formed clay track, over which

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a dray might be taken in summer and autumn, but which was in winter and early spring in most places a deeply pouched slough of tenacious mire or liquid mud, through which the wearied pack-horses had to splash and flounder. Then—but often not till after restless years of agitation, and accompanied probably by the imposition of heavier rates—came the metalled road, over which wheels might travel with some degree of comfort all the year round.

To the artistic eye, the bush clearings, especially in their earlier stages, may appear as a sore blemish on the face of the landscape. Thickly strewn with blackened logs and branches, and with, perhaps, some remaining giants of the forest still standing, but scorched and dead and gaunt in leafless nakedness, these clearings certainly stand out in ugly contrast with the virgin native bush, whose hundred shades of green, and wealth of feathery fronds, and rich carpet of fern growth must ever delight the eye of the lover of the beautiful in nature. But viewed only with regard to the utility of things, these bush clearings, unsightly though they be, afford ample grounds for satisfaction. The vigorous growth of grass, that springs up from the seed sown after the fire, soon covers thickly the dark brown soil, and gives evidence of great fertility, and sheep or cattle may then be counted amongst the logs in such numbers as would delight the heart of many an owner of open arable land. But even the roughest of these primitive clearings give to experienced eyes promise of smooth pastures or abundant harvests in the not very distant future. Time, and the action of fire, coupled with the continuous hard work on the part of the owners, will bring about a striking change. A stranger visiting them after an absence of some years would be astonished at the improvements effected. The timber will have in great measure disappeared, fences will have been erected on every hand, the slab wharé will have given place to the neat weatherboard cottage, garden and

orchard will now be visible, and the gum-tree of Australia, with the cypress and pine of the Northern Hemisphere, will be preparing to take the place of their dispossessed and less accommodating brethren of New Zealand, who, with a too ardent love for the companions of their beautiful though gloomy forest home, will not bear to part from them or live a separate existence.

Townships, too, are formed here and there as settlement proceeds;—at first a store and post office, a cottage or two, a blacksmith's shop perhaps; then a hotel, another store, and again another hotel,—even though the requirements of the place may not altogether warrant the additional places of business, for it seems to be now an established rule in the Colony that where one of these has been opened there is always someone ready to believe that there must be room for a second.

Some, indeed, of these so-called townships never reach any further stage than the initial one in which they appeared on paper, in all the glories of the sale plans, with streets of high-sounding titles, and terraces and squares; never, it is to be feared, to resound to that busy roar of traffic which the promoters, or at least the unfortunate individuals who were induced to buy sections there, may have looked forward to.

A few there are that from superiority of position, and through fulfilling the wants of advancing settlement over a large surrounding district, make rapid progress and soon outstrip their less fortunate rivals.

One of these was the township of Bloomsbury. At the time this story opens it contained three hotels, as many stores, besides representatives of the various other trades usually established in the up-country centres. It also boasted of a solicitor's office (open, however, as yet only two days in the week), a bank and a land and commission agency or two. A young medical man had also lately commenced

practice there. A newspaper, too, had been established some little time previously—the *Bloomsbury Guardian*, in which Mr. Corcoran, the editor, daily laid before his readers some general news from the outside world, and all items of local interest; drawing attention, on every occasion that offered an opportunity, to the marked advances which the township and district were making in the march of progress, and denouncing the apathy and short-sightedness of the government of the day and its departments, in not sufficiently recognising the importance of the place and ministering more efficiently to its requirements.

The township was the centre of a large district, now being rapidly improved; and already a place of considerable commercial activity, it was destined to make further noted progress during the coming years.

The main road leading through it was a good one, but the others which radiated from the township in different directions into the country were nearly all as yet in the unmetalled state, if cleared and formed at all.

CHAPTER II.

IT was about five miles from this township of Bloomsbury, one evening towards the end of winter, that two men, carrying swags, might have been seen picking their way along one of these unformed or only partly formed roads. The mud was deep in most places, and it was only by frequent diversions to the side of the road line, and by occasionally mounting and walking along some of the prostrate trunks of trees that still lay to the right and left of the narrow cleared track, that progress could be made at all without getting knee-deep in slush.

One of the men was a strongly-built fellow of about thirty-five or forty years of age, with a face rather heavy and stolid, yet showing a good deal of conceit and self-importance. He was dressed in a thick suit of coarse grey tweed, and wore a Scotch bonnet, or Tam O'Shanter cap. His clothes gave evidence of the time they had been in use, as much by the stains of grease and dirt that disfigured them as by the signs of hard wear.

The second man, older than his companion, was not so warmly clad, and was far from exhibiting the sturdiness of limb and strength of frame which characterised the other; but at the same time in his face might be seen some traces of refinement and intellectuality—in which that of the other was wanting—though these were sadly marred by marks of dissipation.

“Hold hard, Davie,” he said, as he seated himself on a

log and tossed the blankets from his shoulder, "I must have a spell. This cursed track—or road, as that fool we met a couple of hours ago called it—is taking it out of me. Road be blowed! it wouldn't take much more water to make a canal of it in most places, and it's getting worse the further we go. It'll soon be dark, and we'll never be able to get to the township to-night, and the prospect of accommodation about here doesn't look inviting"; and the speaker gazed dismally round on the gloomy standing bush and log-strewn, muddy track.

"I'm no sae anxious to reach the toonship the nicht," the other replied with a broad Scotch accent. His name was David Dunlop, but he was commonly called Scotch Davie, or Davie the Sundowner, and as such was well known in the men's quarters of nearly every sheep station over most of New Zealand. At one or other of these he had been in the habit of turning up just as night was setting in. His supper, bed and breakfast were assured to him, and he went on his way again in the morning. With a most accommodating pace he would manage to reach the next station at nightfall again, were it only a mile or two from the one which he left in the morning. Ostensibly on the look out for work, it was but rarely that he condescended to accept a job when it was offered to him, being ever ready with some excuse,—"He was juist awa' to Blackridge, whaur he had promised to dae a bit o' gairdenin'," or "aff doon to Clandeboy, whaur he expected to meet a mate o' his ain, and tak' a bit o' fencin'!" or "he didna juist feel up tae" the class of work required of him. At long intervals, indeed, when his personal requirements necessitated the replenishing of his pocket, he might take employment for a few days at some light occupation. It was shrewdly hinted, however, that he was not over-particular as to the means of giving his finances a lift which chance might throw in his way; but, indeed, in his ordinary rounds, money was of little service to him. His capacious

stomach could take in at breakfast a supply of food sufficient, if need be, to last him till the evening ; and his swag generally contained some handy stock in the eatable way that, with the help of the ever-present tea-billy which he carried, could supply a meal if necessary. A case bottle of something stronger than tea was occasionally to be found in his swag also.

“I’m no’ sae anxious to reach the toonship the nicht,” he said, “if I could see ony way o’ winnin’ to comfortable quarters till the morn. But deil tak’ the hour I agreed to gang amang the cockatoos wi ye, Bill ; an’ I could wish mysel’ back amang the squatters again. Your wee bit farmers are a measly lot, and there’s no’ much o’ a welcome for a poor hameless laddie to be expected frae ony o’ them. To be sure, ane is aye made at hame in a bushfa’ers’ or roadmen’s camp to a share o’ what’s goin’ ; but gie me a big station for comfort. Ye maun hae siller in your pocket if ye gang near ony o’ your toonships, an’ I’m thinkin’, Bill, ye ha’ena ower muckle cash, nae mair than I hae mysel’, to throw awa’ in Bloomsbury, or whatever ye ca’ the place, when we get there.”

“I tell you I have a friend there,” replied the other, —“or I think I have—and if he’s the man I take him to be, he’ll not see me hard up for a pound.”

“I aye misdoot freen’ship when it’s expected to put its han’ in its pocket,” Davie answered. “Your freen’ may no’ be sae pleased to see you as you’ll be to see him.”

“I don’t say that he will,” said Bill, with a laugh ; and I haven’t, perhaps, much greater faith in friendship than you have, Davie ; but sometimes other feelings besides friendship will make a man part with the ‘ready.’”

“Ah, weel,” said Davie, “it was an ill day that brocht us this gate frae the coast. May his weasan’ never be wet that tauld us to tak’ the near way, as he ca’d it, through the bush. The langest way aboot is aften the nearest way

hame. But it's time we were trampin' it again, to see if we can win some place o' shelter for the nicht, be it hut or ha'. I can noo see smoke risin' oot ower that bit hill ayont, that gies hopes o' a supper an' a shakedoon."

They shouldered their swags again, and after gaining the top of the rising ground pointed out by Davie, they saw, some little distance in front, signs of human habitation. A large clearing opened out on the right, and a little way back from the road-line stood a slab hut—or wharé, as it is generally called in New Zealand—of rather better appearance than ordinary, from the iron chimney of which issued the smoke that the travellers had seen. Farther back from the road were yards and a larger building evidently used as a wool-shed.

The dusk of evening was now falling, and our acquaintances turned in towards the humble abode, though larger buildings in extensive clearings could be dimly seen on the left, about a mile farther down the road.

Before they reach the wharé, we will go in advance and take a closer look at it and its occupants. A building of but one apartment it was, constructed entirely of split timber, but neatly put together. The roof was of iron, as was also the chimney. The latter, deep and wide, extended nearly across the whole of one end, and formed almost a small compartment of its own. Its dimensions, however, were but in keeping with the supply of firewood outside; and it is only in the bush districts that such fireplaces are to be seen. Two stretchers, or bunks, were placed against the walls of the back and of one side, and a third again over one of these, as is the fashion on shipboard. Two small windows gave light to the apartment.

It is astonishing the quantity of goods and odds and ends that can be comfortably stowed away in a small place of this kind—provisions on shelves, saddles, perhaps, on high on the cross-ties of the roof, tools of various sorts here, books and newspapers snugly resting yonder—a hundred articles find ready lodgment, and still there is room.

CHAPTER III.

OUTSIDE this particular wharé to which Davie and his companion were drawing nigh, a young fellow of about six-and-twenty, tall and muscular, with brown hair and beard, and with an honest, manly look in his face and eyes, was chopping up a tawa log into convenient-sized firewood. He used the axe with that easy swing and accurate aim which only long practice with it can give.

"How are the spuds, Maurice?" he called out to someone who was inside the wharé.

"The potato is cooked, as the old Maori said," was the answer in a cheerful voice. "The billy is on the point of boiling, the table is laid, and the cold meat is—is to the fore again;" and the owner of the voice stepped outside the door. He was of medium height, a year or two older than the other, and somewhat darker, with a bright and fearless eye that generally had a humorous twinkle in it. Broad-shouldered he was also, and powerful in arm and limb.

This was Maurice M'Keown, employed by the other, who owned the property, to assist him in the work of the farm, in attending to the stock, in logging up and clearing, in fencing, and also on one or two occasions in doing a little bushfalling, though the latter work was usually let by contract, one of which was at this particular time being carried out by a man, known as Flash Harry, and his mates.

Brought up on a small farm in Ulster, M'Keown had

emigrated to the Colony some years previously, and, at first in the South Island and afterwards in the Bush districts of the North, had sought for and found employment wherever it was most readily to be obtained. He had been with his present employer for nearly two years. The relations between the two partook less of the character of master and servant than are usually found between those similarly situated. They were, indeed, in some respects, more like those of mates, for Maurice seemed to take as keen an interest in all that was done, or to be done, on the farm as the employer himself did. He was ever forward, it is true, in taking the heaviest end of a log if a fencing line was being cleared, and, if they engaged in the work of bush-falling, when a particularly big or tough rimu or rata had to come down, it was generally Maurice who tackled it.

Frank Ashwin, to whom the property belonged, was a New Zealander born, the son of one of the early settlers. His father, who owned a large farm, named Harefield, in the open country, some fifty miles nearer the coast, had a few years previously started him in life on his own account here in the bush, by purchasing this property of about five hundred acres, and since then Frank had been engaged in bringing it into pasture with as little delay as possible. Though many improvements had been effected, the slab wharé that had been up on the first clearing made still remained the only place of residence. A more roomy and pretentious structure had often been spoken of, but the erection of it had still been deferred.

“Down, Scot! down, Rove!—what the dickens!—Hallo! visitors, by Jove!” exclaimed Ashwin, as our friends from the road approached, having roused the keen watchfulness of the sheep dogs.

“And may I never see Sunday,” said M’Keown, as the men drew nearer, “if one of them isn’t Davie Dunlop the Sundowner. I saw him once or twice at Langridge, in the

other Island, and would know the cut of his jib again among a thousand. He has crossed the Straits, then. Times must be bad among the stations when Davie has come so far out of his beat. We'll have them for the night."

The travellers now came up, and were sniffed at suspiciously by the dogs, who did not seem at all prepossessed in their favour. Davie was spokesman, and averred that they were dead-beat, and asked for a bit of something to eat and permission to make their bed somewhere for the night. "Fower days we ha'e been trampin' it," he said, "but this last ane caps them a'; it's been oot o' ane mud-hole into anither the day lang, when we werena on the logs. Gi'e me the open lands for gettin' aboot in. But ye'll ha'e a bonnie country here in time when ye get the roads made fit for Christian folk to traivel on; an' ye'll no want firin' for a bit, that's ane comfort."

Their request was readily granted by Ashwin.

"The accommodation is not of the best, as you may see," he said. "There is a spare bunk in the wharé for one of you, and the other can doss down somewhere; there is plenty of room in the shed, but it's a bit draughty, I am afraid, these cold nights."

They were now invited to join in the meal already prepared, and proved themselves good trenchermen. This was the case especially with Davie, before whose appetite huge quantities of cold meat, potatoes and bread disappeared, washed down with pints of hot tea. The remains of some cold plum-pudding, left over from the Sunday's dinner, also followed. He made such good use of time that he thought some apology might be needed, and said :

"There's naethin' gies a man an appetite like trampin' it alang sic tracks as ye hae in these pairts; an' it's an ower lang fast since the morn."

"If you could only work as well with your hands as you do with your teeth, Davie, you would be the right man for the

bush country," M'Keown said, rather rudely in substance but in a joking tone; "and you needn't go short of a job about here, if it's hard work you want. Flash Harry, who has a contract from Mr. Ashwin here, was saying only this morning that he would take on a couple of wages men at bushfalling—so there's a job at hand if you're wanting one."

Davie replied, after he had given a short chuckling laugh at M'Keown's first remark, that work was what he was on the look out for, but that he had first to go as far as the township with his mate who was expecting to meet a friend there; and he "misdooted if this bushfa'in' wark is a'thegither in my line—no' that I'm afeard o' hard graft, if it comes to that."

Later in the evening, as they smoked their pipes in front of the roaring fire (Davie claimed to be just out of tobacco, and had to ask for a bit), the man whom Davie called Bill—Westall was his other name—asked :

"What sort of a township is this Bloomsbury, and how far are we from it?"

"About four miles," replied Ashwin. "It's a rising place, still going ahead fast; and when we get the railway to it 'things will boom,' properly, I expect."

"Do you know anyone of the name of Wilmot who lives there—a land agent, or something of the sort?" Westall enquired.

"Wilmot?—Oh, yes," Ashwin replied. "He's quite the leading man of the place—owns a lot of the township; is part proprietor of the newspaper, people say, and of heaven knows what besides. I hear he is going to stand for the House at the next election, and is likely to get in, too."

Westall appeared satisfied, and said no more on the subject.

"I hae been thinkin' o' stannin' for Parliament mysel' for some consteetency," chimed in Davie, after a pause. "I hae seen as much o' New Zealand as maist men,—if that's ony recommendation; and I hae gaun gye deep into politics—I'm

no' afeard but I could haud my ain in the Parliament Hoose wi' ony o' them."

"As a special representative of all sundowners and followers of the Wallaby Track, I suppose," said M'Keown,

"As a speecial representative o' the Warkin' Man, sir. wha has been kep' under fut ower lang," replied Davie, warmly.

"Yes," said Ashwin, "and you would be as well qualified to specially represent him as are some members already in the House, who claim to make that their particular business."

"Nae doot," replied Davie, who felt himself flattered by the remark of the last speaker; while between him and Maurice there was evidently no love lost. The latter never missed an opportunity of having a shot at him in a good-humoured way, and this Davie was inclined to resent.

Once, later in the evening, when he appeared about to lose his temper at some thrust of M'Keown's, Ashwin, in order to change the subject, said :

"Never mind him, Davie, but give us a song. I'll be bound to say you could sing a good one if you liked."

"I'll no' say that I'm vera musical," Davie replied, "though I could, mebbe, gie ye a stave. But," he went on, "I'll no' be the first to begin. Anither o' ye maun start aff. A guid example's aye easier followed."

"Then, Maurice," said Ashwin, "sing us that bush-faller's song of Flash Harry's. I heard you humming the chorus of it to-day."

Maurice, thus appealed to, after a little persuasion, sung to a lively air, with tolerable voice, the following, which Flash Harry had either composed himself or had picked up somewhere lately. This Harry, still young in years, was one of those men who, having spent most of their adult existence at the gold-diggings in one or other of the Colonies, and having there acquired a roving, independent habit of life, feeling themselves to be their own

masters, still disdain to engage in day-work for any employer; and even when the whim or the force of circumstances leads them into other fields of labour, they continue to preserve their overstrained feelings of independence, and take contract work only. Harry and his mate had now been working in the bush districts of the North Island for two or three seasons. He had come to like the life, and the song that Maurice now sung was known as his.

O give me the life in the forest,
 Away from the crowd and the crush ;
 What reck though the work be the sorest,
 There's no place for me like the bush ;
 For the ring of the axe,
 And the tree as it cracks,
 And the earth-shaking crash at it falls,
 Are the sounds that I love,
 All others above,
 Heard when the gay tui calls.

We are out when the first birds are singing,
 And home as they settle to rest,
 And each evening the wharé is ringing
 With laughter, with song, and with jest.
 O the ring of the axe,
 And the tree as it cracks,
 And the earth-shaking crash as it falls,
 Are the sounds that I love,
 All others above—
 Hark ! how the gay tui calls !

Let clodhoppers plough, then, and harrow ;
 Let larrikins loiter at flax ;
 Let the navvy ply shovel and barrow,
 But give me the swing of the axe.
 For the ring of the axe,
 And the tree as it cracks,
 And the earth-shaking crash as it falls,
 Are the sounds that I love,
 All others above,
 Heard when the gay tui calls.

"No' a bad sang," said Davie; "but I'm dootsu' if chappin' doon trees is wark that I wad be likely to get fond o'."

"We'll trouble you now for your song, Davie," said Ashwin.

Davie did not take quite so much persuasion as some young ladies do, with

 Their pretty oath by yea and nay,
 They could not, would not, durst not play,

when asked to favour an assembled company, but "he misdoored if he was in vera guid voice the nicht." After a preliminary cough or two, however, he lilted forth the following song, which he said a mate of his used to sing :

O here's to the joys of the Wallaby Track,
 Then it's up with the swag and the billy,
For though work may be plenty, or work may be slack,
It's nice to lie down in the sun on your back—
 O a lot of that work will not kill ye.

The burden is light when the shoulders are broad,
 And then there's no reason to hurry.
The stages are short and our feet are well shod,
And we make the pace suit to the length of the road—
 O there's nothing in life to make worry.

The squatter may growl at the prices of wool,
 And the farmer complain of the weather.
But though money be tight, and though times may be dull,
It's little we care if our tucker-bag's full—
 They can all go to ruin together.

You may talk of the honour on labour attends,
 You may sing of its profits and pleasure—
He's a fool that through life on his labour depends ;
I never took work to be one of my friends—
 I get on much better with leisure.

Then it's off and away on the Wallaby Track,
 And it's up with the swag and the billy ;
For though work may be plenty, or work may be slack,
It's nice to lie down in the sun on your back—
 O a lot of that work will not kill ye.

Shortly afterwards they turned in, Westall at Ashwin's invitation securing the spare bunk. Davie, when asked if he would take up his quarters in the shed, remarked that as the night appeared to be frosty, he would make himself as comfortable as he could on some sacks on the floor in front of the fire.

"I'm no' ower parteek'lar whaur I lie doon," he said, "a guid conscience is aye a quiet bedfellow." And his heavy breathing soon afterwards testified to the profoundness of his repose. He "slept the sleep of the just," or of the unjust, for it is difficult to say which of the two sleep the sounder.

CHAPTER IV.

M'KEOWN was first out of bed in the morning.

"Roll out, my hearties," he cried, after he had raked the red embers together and piled on more wood on a fire that was seldom or never allowed to die quite out "Roll out," he cried. "The tuis have been whistling good morning for the last half-hour, and the kakas screaming shame on all sluggards. Get up, Davie"—touching that individual with the toe of his boot—"Get up, you Murrumbidgee whaler, and clear the deck. You'll find plenty of water in the creek below for a wash."

The breakfast was soon ready, and ample justice done to it. The only hint Maurice gave of there being anything extraordinary in Davie's appetite was by remarking, as that person helped himself to another plateful of meat, "We'll have to kill a sheep this morning, Mr. Frank."

He suggested, also, as they went outside, that their visitors, before leaving, might just as well chop up a log of firewood that lay near the door. Davie picked up an axe and made two or three strokes with it, but presently, whether intentionally or not, over-reached his blow, and, bringing the handle down heavily on the farther edge of the log, snapped it off close to the head.

"If I thought you broke that axe-handle on purpose," Maurice said, angrily, "I would break what's left of it over your head again."

"Would ye, by G—— I'd cleave yer skull for ye if

ye tried it, my bonnie man," shouted Davie, as he picked up the axe-head.

M'Keown looked for a moment as if he would have sprung upon him, but Ashwin interposed, and said :

"Never mind, Maurice. Accidents will happen, you know. It is evident that Davie isn't qualified as a bush whacker yet. Good morning, men."

"Let us know when you are coming back this way, and we'll have the fatted calf killed for you," Maurice called out after them.

"You shouldn't rouse the bad blood in such a fellow," Ashwin said, when the others had gone. "He might be a dangerous character where there's felled bush lying about. He could stick a match in it some night when it wasn't wanted."

"Faith, I didn't think of that," replied the other ; "and yet I remember now that he was blamed for firing the tussocks and burning a lot of sheep on Grassdale run, down south, one night when there was a big Nor'-wester blowing. Old Jones, the owner, had been in a bad humour, and turned Davie away when he came up to the station in the evening. He was sorry for it afterwards. The tussocks got alight somehow, and the fire swept half the run, whether Davie lit it or not. He was blamed for it, anyhow. But I don't suppose we'll have these gentry back this way again. I'm thinking the bush country won't suit Davie, and before there's any danger with the felled bush he'll be back among the stations again. I hate these lazy, loafing devils," Maurice went on, "that roam the country and don't want to work. They give honest men that are looking for a job a bad name. That other chap, that Davie calls Bill, doesn't seem to have much harm in him, but I fancy he won't stray far from a public-house if he can help it."

Meanwhile Davie and his companion trudged on towards Bloomsbury. The road which they now followed was better

than that which they had travelled on the previous day, though it was still wet and muddy in most places. The buildings which they had noticed on the evening before as lying some distance down the road, on the left, proved on nearer approach to be of a better character than those usually met with in a newly-settled bush district. A plantation of pines and macrocarpa had already attained forward growth, and showed that this farm must have been one of the first in the locality to be cleared and improved. The house itself was near the road, and as the travellers passed the gateway leading to it, an old man, grey-haired and bent, was walking on the drive in front, which was bordered with some shrubs and flower-beds; while a young woman, gifted with good looks, stood on the steps of the verandah, speaking with the old man the while. Empty packing cases were lying about—these and other evidence tending to show that the present occupants had only lately taken possession.

“There’s a bonnie lassie, noo,” said Davie, whose inquisitive eyes were ever on the alert and allowed nothing to go unnoticed.

Westall, who would have passed by without lifting his head, turned at Davie’s remark and looked also. Stopping suddenly, however, his gaze seemed riveted on the face of the old man.

“My God!” he exclaimed in a low voice, as if speaking to himself, as he turned again and walked on, “could it be possible?”

“What the de’il were ye glow’rin’ at?” asked Davie. “Did ye think ye saw the ghaist o’ yer gran’seyther?”

“I thought I saw something like the ghost of a man I used to know,” Westall replied, and added, musingly, “But the thing’s impossible—only some fancied resemblance in the features to those I once knew so well.”

“It was the lassie took my fancy,” said Davie. “Ecod, I’ll ca’ at that hoose some o’ these days, if I traivel this

gate again. I'm aye sure o' a guid meal whaur there's a bonnie lassie aboot—I can aye get to the saft side o' them. But I'm thinkin', Bill, we micht do waur than just turn in here the noo for anither bit o' breakfast—a second breakfast micht save the price o' a dinner in the toonship. What say ye? I'm for turnin' back and gangin' in."

"Turn back, and be d——d to you for a glutton! . I'm going on," replied Bill, with unusual heat, his thoughts suddenly recalled from contemplation of the past.

"Ah, weel," said Davie, nothing put out, "a wilfu' man maun hae his way; but gin ye hae been as lang on the road as I hae been, ye'll learn mair wisdom."

They shortly afterwards reached a metalled portion of the road, and stepped out with increased pace towards the township.

The township of Bloomsbury was at this time, in so far at least as its population was located, confined chiefly to one long street, which also formed part of the main road of the district. This was intersected by two or three streets, with a few houses scattered along them. Indeed, the buildings generally had not as yet ranged themselves into serried ranks, but appeared rather to have been thrown out in skirmishing order. Here and there, it is true, two or three of them seemed to have been drawn together as if for mutual protection; but the gaps were as yet far in excess of the parts occupied by buildings, though every few months saw some curtailment of the former. The whole area of ground laid out as a township was very large, and extended for a mile or two in some directions; but as a good deal of it was still in standing bush, and a still larger portion was used only as grazing ground, it was somewhat difficult to know where town ended and country began.

Sanguine in their anticipations, and bountifully provident for the wants of posterity, the promoters of these bush townships—whether it were the Government, private companies

or individuals, or a supplementing of the former by the latter—made the boundaries of them wide enough for all possible future requirements, and gave ample scope for prospective development. This was very commendable and necessary in some instances, but where a township, as sometimes happened, did not “go off” at the sale, or if it did go off, was never subsequently embellished with a building of any kind, the effect had something of the ludicrous about it—for while settlement went on around the “township,” and the land was cleared and occupied, the “town” itself remained a solid block of standing bush, and the absentee owners of its acre or quarter-acre sections were only reminded of their possessions by the persistent recurrence of the notices to pay rates.

Bloomsbury was not of this class. From the first it went steadily forward, with an ever-increasing value for its sections. And the future will yet see its vacant lots occupied—not, indeed, by buildings crowded together as in the cities of the Old World with their slums and stifling hot-beds of disease and crime, but with ample room and scope enough for cottage garden, for sheltered orchard, for shrubbery and lawn.

About the centre of the township, on the main street, two or three hotels, already mentioned, stood, with most of the other places of business scattered around in their vicinity. The hotels were at such a distance from each other as to allow the landlord of each to stand at his own door and watch with feelings of envy any unusual trend of customers seeking refreshment at the other. They were large, pretentious buildings of their class, with verandah and balcony to each, and were well-conducted inns, the accommodation afforded to travellers being all that could be expected—equal, indeed, to that of some of the best hotels in the larger centres. The third hotel stood at the junction of the main road with that leading from Ashwin’s place—known as the Melton Road—

and was half-a-mile or more from the others, and near the boundary of the township. It seemed as if it were meant to lie in wait as the first house of call for the thirsty traveller coming in, and the last in which he could indulge in a parting glass if he were leaving the township; and as if it preferred to carry on its own business without the scrutiny and overlooking eye of any near neighbours.

The accommodation was of the rough and ready kind, and charged for accordingly. It was frequented chiefly by the less respectable among the bushfallers and other working men of the district. On a Saturday evening some of these were sure to seek the pleasures of the township, and make things lively for the night, keeping up, perhaps, their carouse till the following Monday; and when men were paid off from a contract, and came in with their cheques, a hearty welcome awaited them at the Cosmopolitan from Mr. Jacob Brasch, the landlord. Not that such a welcome was to be found only at the Cosmopolitan, for neither of the other bonifaces was at all inclined to turn away from the bar of his hotel any men just off a job, if their behaviour was at all decent, though he might be more particular as to the character and demeanour of those who would stay in his house--Powlet's Criterion had the reputation of being more select and particular in this respect.

The natives, too, who had a settlement some seven or eight miles distant, used to frequent the Cosmopolitan when they were in funds. At these times, men and women of them might be seen drinking in the bar, or seated, smoking, on the door steps and verandah, or lolling about the passages.

Brasch was a German who had knocked about the Colony for a good many years and had made money. He boasted that his establishment was open to all comers. He asked no questions from those requiring accommodation, and, in consequence, kept a rough and rowdy house. Men said, on the other hand, that he was never known to turn a fellow who

was hard-up away from his door without assistance, but would always give a meal, and, if need be, a bed to anyone who couldn't pay. He was popular with the men, consequently ; and, perhaps, lost nothing by his liberality. And if a good deal of " lambing-down " was done in his house and he were charged with it, he would say, with his foreign accent, and in that stiff manner of speech which one who, as he proceeds, has to translate his thoughts into the spoken words of another tongue, necessarily used, " If a fellow vill knock down his cheque and spendt his moneys in drink, vy, he may as vell and betters do it in mine house as in anoder man's."

His Scandinavian cousins, of whom there are a good number in the bush districts, occasionally patronised Brasch's establishment, but generally only for a mid-day meal, or for a glass of beer, or as lodgers for the night when on a journey. The principles of economy, early inculcated, are not often forgotten by them, and it is rarely that anyone belonging to these frugal and industrious nationalities is to be found squandering his substance in riotous living, though, of course, one sometimes meets with an exception.

In the township proper a boarding-house or two provided accommodation, at a reasonable rate, for those among the labouring class who did not relish the life in the noisier and less reputable hotel.

CHAPTER V.

BENEATH the verandah of the Criterion—the larger of the other two hostellries, being also the first established, and still accounted the leading one of the place—three or four men of respectable appearance were assembled after lunch on the afternoon of the day, the morning of which saw Davie and his companion proceed towards the township.

Though the winter had barely yet passed, the day was warm, and the bright unclouded sunshine streaming in where they stood made the situation enjoyable.

“The place is cheap enough,” said a stout florid man, tall and of good proportions, with full grey eyes in which shrewdness was combined with a certain look of boldness, which latter was also characteristic of the general style in which he carried himself. He appeared to be between forty-five and fifty years of age. “The place is cheap enough,” he was saying, “though it wasn’t sold through me. It is all in grass, I believe, and has a metalled road nearly all the way to it. With a good house, too, and every convenience, it is right enough for the money. Has anyone seen the new proprietor?—I was absent from Bloomsbury, I think, on the day he passed through.”

“I saw him; he stopped here for lunch,” drawled a young gentleman, dressed in a light grey tweed suit of stylish cut, and with a cap of the same material placed jauntily on his head, “I saw the old gentleman. He seems to be rather too far gone in the sere and yellow leaf to give promise of much success in the glorious work of colonisation, as you would call

it, Wilmot. There was a boy, a son I suppose, with him ; but what interested me most was a deuced good-looking girl that called him father, and didn't seem to have eyes, egad, for anybody else."

"You're a bit of a lady-killer, no doubt, Ponsonby, but you mustn't expect a girl to throw herself at you at first sight, or exchange amorous glances with you, either. Don't imagine you can carry all before you in that fashion. Steady's the horse to win. Don't make all your running at the start, or break away before the flag falls," said a short and rather stout young man, whose name was Spalding, and who acted as agent in the branch of the bank lately opened here.

"Oh, don't get anxious on my account, old man," replied Ponsonby, "I'm not at all struck. The girl's good-looking enough in her way, but she's not my style—not enough fire and dash for me. One of your quiet, placid, mild-eyed sort of beauties is not going to captivate me. The place is too deuced quiet and placid as it is. But if you'll show me a real jolly girl, with some sparkle and go in her, I shouldn't mind doing a little in the amatory way. Not that I'm of the marrying sort at all, but a turn of love-making would just help to break the monotony of this blooming Bloomsbury Township of yours. But here's Morton riding up," he added, as a horseman was seen approaching. "He is a neighbour of the new comers now, you know, and I dare say could tell you more about them than I can,—that is, if he is in the humour to speak to us at all. He may pass us with a nod, or without one, as he generally does."

The person referred to rode up, and, to the surprise of some of them, dismounted and hung up his horse. He was a man above middle height, of about thirty-five, though he perhaps looked older. He had a thoughtful cast of countenance, but his eyes, which were deep set, had a keen and searching glance with them, not unmixed frequently with an expression of cynicism, which latter might be also seen perhaps

more clearly in the lines of his mouth ; and yet at times a kindness of disposition would, as it were, in spite of himself, make itself visible in his face and eyes. He was about passing into the hotel when Wilmot accosted him in a rather pompous, grandiloquent manner which was habitual with him.

“ We were just speaking, Mr. Morton, of those lately arrived neighbours of yours, the people who have gone into Smith’s old place ; and expressing a hope that they would be found an acquisition to the district. Have you made their acquaintance yet ? ”

“ I have not,” Morton replied—“ Not in the sense you mean. I haven’t called on them, nor avowed how glad I was to have them for neighbours, nor found out all about their antecedents, nor inspected with a critical eye themselves and their belongings, so that I could pull them to pieces afterwards. I can leave all that for the women of Bloomsbury to do, or any of the men who feel so inclined. I happened to see them, however, as they drove past, and Mr. Elwood spoke to me across the fence since then. He hasn’t had much experience in bush farming, I fancy.”

“ But in this magnificent district, as you know, Mr. Morton, the grass luxuriates, and the stock thrive, in spite of our inexperience, and experience is soon gained,” Wilmot replied.

“ I am not so sure of all that,” answered Morton. “ In the meantime, while this old man is gaining his experience, there’s a chance for some one to make money out of him. Has nobody a line of broken-mouthed ewes that could be palmed off to him as four-tooths ; or a broked-winded old screw, well up in condition, that could be sold to him as a five year old ; a town section at double its value ; or shares in some promising venture that are just worth less than nothing at all ? But I forgot : we are all honest here.”

“ Ah, Mr. Morton, you are always too hard upon poor humanity. But speaking of shares, now—have you seen the prospectus of our new Town Hall Company ? I know you must

take an interest in our rising township, and be desirous for its advancement ; and is it not a shame that the inhabitants of this important centre, of this rich and progressive district, should have no suitable place of meeting in which to discuss the burning questions of the hour ; in which," he continued, warming to his subject—"in which the candidate who may aspire to represent us in the Parliament of our country may lay his views before us ; and in which music and the drama may afford us, in our hours of relaxation, delight and instruction ; in which the youth of both sexes—and some amongst us, perhaps, who are no longer young—may—may 'chase the glowing hours with flying feet'? Besides, you know," he added, "the thing will pay. Let me put your name down for fifty shares."

"Pay," said Morton, with a laugh—"no doubt it will. And a building of the kind is very necessary for the purposes you mention. We need a place where so-called actors may show us false views of life, and strut and mouth for our edification, and where our young fellows—our gilded youth—may look at Sally Skyhigh's legs for a bob ; where the designing, self-seeking politician may fool the electors to his heart's content, or the political blatherskite talk by the hour about what he doesn't understand—very necessary, no doubt ; but—I'll not be a shareholder."

"There is evidently nothing quite right or satisfactory in this world, according to your view, Mr. Morton," replied Wilmot, who, having a design on the constituency himself, felt touched by the other's disparaging reference to candidates for political honours. "If politicians are all so selfish or ignorant as you would have us believe, why not give us the inestimable advantage of securing your wisdom in guiding the affairs of the State, and stand for the House yourself?"

"God forbid that I should ever come to that," Morton replied, as he turned and walked into the hotel.

"You won't make much out of him," said Ponsonby.

“There’s too much gall and wormwood in Morton’s composition to suit my taste. Why doesn’t he try to enjoy life, egad, while he can? He has got plenty of money, I believe, and has a good property as well; and yet he lives like a hermit, with only a man and a boy about him—a regular woman-hater who won’t have one of the sex near his place. Egad, if I lived there, I should want to see some blooming petticoats flitting around. If my old governor, at home, would only hand over the needful in bulk instead of doling it out in quarterly allowances, that never, egad, seem to last the quarter out, I would show Morton how to make life enjoyable.”

Ponsonby was one of a class, somewhat numerous in the Colonies, who, having begun to sow their youthful wild oats with a rather heavy hand in the Old Country, are dispatched here to finish the in-putting of the crop, and—to reap the harvest.

“I think your governor shows his wisdom in holding back the cash a bit, Ponsie,” said Spalding. “That colonial experience which is thought so much of at home, and which you were sent out here to acquire, can hardly be said to have been perfected yet.”

“I rather fancy,” drawled Ponsonby, “I could make more rapid strides towards finishing my education if I had more money to spend.”

“Or had none at all except what you earned,” replied the other. “But,” he added, looking at his watch, “it’s time for me to be at the Bank again. By the way, Wilmot, who is that seedy-looking individual who has been hanging round the door of your office over there, and is knocking at it now? It looks more like a subscription list than a land sale for you, I fancy.”

“I have had my eye on him,” Wilmot replied. “But I must go now and see what he wants.”

His visitor was our acquaintance, Mr. Westall, who, having

left his swag and his companion of the road at the Cosmopolitan, had sauntered into the township in quest of the friend whom he claimed to have in Bloomsbury.

As Wilmot approached him, the two men looked at each other steadily—Wilmot with that bold stare that was characteristic of him, and Westall with a keen, inquisitive look that after a few seconds seemed to satisfy him, for it changed into one of smiling recognition as he said :

“ You haven’t forgot an old acquaintance, I hope, Mr.—a—Wilmot? By the way,” he added, in a lower voice, and looking round to see that no one was within hearing, “ I see you have picked up a new name since we last met. Time works changes in us all, but your old friend Westall couldn’t be mistaken in you, though you have taken to wear a beard now, and have grown a deal stouter.”

“ My good fellow, you appear to labour——” began the other, but checked himself, and continued after a pause, “ And what the devil has brought you here, Westall? Come inside, off the street, if you want to talk to me. I expected you would have drunk yourself to death in ’Frisco before now.”

“ Well, I call that not over kind,” answered Westall ; “ I expected a little more friendly greeting from you after all these years. After I got out of the hospital there—where I was laid up with fever—and found you had cleared out in the meantime, things didn’t look over-pleasant, I can tell you. I hadn’t a penny in my pocket ; and the man that I might have expected some help from was gone without leaving any address behind him. It wasn’t quite a friendly thing to do, was it, now? I made myself useful to you there, didn’t I? You can’t deny that. Any money I had from you was earned ; and if I know more about your past life than you would care to have made public, I didn’t trade on that then, I think. Well, after a while I thought I would try Australia for a change, and managed to scrape up enough to pay my passage.

I may have had an idea that you went in the same direction yourself. I have been knocking round the Colonies since then, pretty hard up generally—but not always. I made a rise in Queensland once, at the Towers, but it all went soon; and now I have given New Zealand a turn for a year or so; and have had the good fortune to drop on you. I caught sight of you as you jumped into a train in Wellington. I was pretty certain of you, though I only saw you for a moment; and got your present name and address from the man you had just parted from on the platform. And here I am, to renew old friendship—but dead broke—without a cent—had to hump it all the way on foot. Friendship like that deserves to be rewarded."

"And you expect me to replenish your pocket and send you on your way rejoicing, I suppose?" said Wilmot, with a sneer.

"To have the pocket replenished would certainly be very acceptable," Westall replied; "but as for going on my way—well—I don't know that I shall do so just yet, in fact, I am thinking of settling down here—for a time at least. I am told you have done well here—quite the leading man of the place, invested a lot of capital, and making money hand over fist, with nobody but yourself to spend it. You would never miss a little pecuniary assistance to an old friend, whose habits are not very expensive, you know, or give him a helping hand in some way. I suppose I have as good a show of getting something to do here as anywhere else. You may want a clerk yourself, and I haven't quite forgot how to keep books yet."

"And suppose I refuse to afford any assistance, pecuniary or otherwise, and will have nothing to do with you?" Wilmot asked, regarding the other with a look, under which the weaker-minded man shifted and quailed.

"We need hardly speculate as to what might take place in that event," he answered uneasily; "you were never given to refuse a helping hand if a fellow was down on his luck, or

be close-fisted in money matters. You were always fonder of making money than of keeping it. I won't say that I am likely to do or say anything to injure you in your position here, or rake up bygones. You wouldn't have seen me here now if things hadn't gone badly with me, and I knew you wouldn't refuse to help a fellow for old times' sake."

"Look here, Westall," replied Wilmot, "you know me pretty well by this time. I haven't changed. You know that trifles are not likely to stop me in any course I may elect to follow. You have found me here in a position in which I have gained the respect and confidence of my fellow colonists—with wider opportunities to be perhaps afforded me before long in which to merit a still greater share of that confidence and esteem—an honourable position in this new country where I have made my home, and—and one of usefulness, I think I am justified in saying. You have come here—there is no use denying it—in the hope and expectation of selling your silence with regard to some peccadillos of the past. You think that disclosures here in this British Colony, and in the position which I now occupy, would entail now weightier consequences to me than it would formerly have done during our intercourse in America, where I might have laughed at your threats or have had you knocked on the head for making them. But don't deceive yourself. If I care to say I defy you, you might do your damnedest, and who would believe you if I said your story was a pure fabrication for the purpose of extorting blackmail? As for setting the law in motion, after all these years, the thing's absurd—besides, as you know, expiation has been already made, in a sense."

"Ah," said Westall, sadly, "do not mention that expiation. In the moments when I am not wholly lost to better feelings, the thought of it lies on me like a nightmare even still; and it will continue to haunt me to my dying day."

"Well, well, let it rest," said the other, "and I don't mind helping you, for old times' sake—but if you drop a

hint of knowing anything to my disadvantage—of ever having previously known me at all, in fact, you'll get no further help from me. I don't choose to be afraid of you, or of what you can do. You know me, I think, by this time. You will be a remittance man, you understand, drawing through me, as agent, your monthly or quarterly allowance from your old father or aunt, or somebody in England who has heard of your broken-down state, and doesn't intend to let you starve. I'll see, later on, if I can get you into anything, or give you something to do myself. I am afraid, though, that you are neither well fitted for work of any kind now, nor anxious for it. Where are you stopping?"

"Stopping!" replied Westall. "I left my swag at the pub down the road—the Cosmopolitan, I think they call it."

"Very well," Wilmot said, "stay there. I will give you as much as will pay for your board, and something extra for drinks. You haven't turned teetotaller yet, I suppose?"

Westall grinned, and said that he would be the better for something besides for pressing requirements, as he "needed a new rig out." This was agreed to, and the money paid, and Westall then took his way back towards the Cosmopolitan.

Wilmot looked after him with a look in which hatred and contempt were blended, or followed each other, as he said to himself, "Curse the fellow and the evil chance that led him to find me out here. The persistent, clinging consequences of a past misdeed are hard to shake off. When years have well-nigh blotted out the memory of it, some far-reaching octopus-like arm of it lays hold on us still. But Westall had better take care not to work at cross purposes with me—as he knows full well. But the fellow will drink himself to death on Brasch's bad whisky, I expect, if he gets the chance," he added, as he turned into his office.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was not long afterwards, indeed, when Westall did sample this same whisky of Brasch's, in company with Davie, for whom he "shouted" as soon as he reached the house.

Davie, since his arrival at the *Cosmopolitan*, had been taking things easy, as was his custom—had eaten his dinner, and afterwards indulged in a sleep on a rough couch in the public-room. From this he was roused by Westall, who invited him to drink.

"Ecod, ye're in luck's way, Bill, an' nae mistak'," he said, as he saw Westall hand over a bank-note in payment. "Yer freen's o' the richt sort efter a'."

Davie tasted his whisky like a connoisseur, taking it undiluted, smacking his lips and sniffing at it.

"That's no bad whusky, Boss," he said; "it's mony a day since I tasted ony wi' juist that flavour wi' it—no since I left Auld Scotland. I hae mony a time put a horn cup under the worm, and let a drap o' speerit that that o' yours 'minds me o' rin intil it, fresh frae the still. Wha's yer speerit merchant?"

"Vell, if you vant to know," replied Jacob, eyeing Davie rather suspiciously, "I gets it all the vay from Dunedin. Scotch it is. Goot visky, isn't it?—special blendt. It warms your vhistle ven it is going down."

"Rather too fiery for my taste," Westall said.

"Shure, an' that shows that Jaehob here doesn't dhrown it out wid wather intoirely before he gives it to us," struck in a voice with a strong Irish brogue; "but, begorra! he'll have to

slocken it a bit more for such dilitate stomachs. Dhrink it aff, me bhoys, and have wan more at moy expinse. The aſthener yez dhrink it the betther yez'll loike it; and that shows it's the rale qualithy."

The speaker was Mr. Dennis O'Byrne, a "small cacytoo," as he called himself. He was the occupier of a rough section, running up on the high hills about nine miles from Bloomsbury. He had a small portion of his land in grass, on which he kept a few sheep; and he occasionally, though rarely, did a few days' work, mustering for some of the other landowners; and at shearing-time might give a helping hand for a day or two. His chief occupation or amusement seemed to lie in hunting the wild cattle and pigs, which were pretty numerous in the Ranges near his section. He had good dogs, and was reckoned a crack shot, so that he rarely failed to bring down a beast or a pig when he went out in quest of big game. In these expeditions he was generally accompanied by an old man, or one at least advanced in years, who lived with him, but who was rarely to be seen in the township.

Old Dan, as he was usually called, or Uncle Dan, as O'Byrne sometimes styled him, was a spare, wiry old chap, with keen, dark, shifty eyes, and with a stubbly, greyish beard which always looked as if it was of about a fortnight's growth. If he were in the habit of shaving at all, no one was known to have ever seen him clean-shaven; but then he was but seldom seen away from home by anyone, and as no other section was occupied beyond O'Byrne's in that direction, the latter being distant some miles from the nearest neighbours, visitors to it were extremely rare, so it could hardly be affirmed with certainty that Old Dan did not sometimes use a razor.

If Dan but seldom visited the township, O'Byrne, on the other hand, was a frequent visitor to it, and to the Cosmopolitan in particular, where he would drop in at all hours of the day, or more often of the night, and where he was

always welcome—bringing with him on his old black mare, not infrequently indeed, some produce of the chase—a quarter of beef perhaps, if he had fallen in with a fat heifer in the *Ranges*, or some heavy joints of pork, if he had been successful in his pig-hunting.

“I’m no sayin’ the whusky’s bad, or ower strang for me—ecod, it couldna’ weel be that; but there’s a twang wi’ it that brings back auld memories. Here’s yer vera guid health,” Davie said, as he tossed off his replenished glass.

Westall took up his quarters at the *Cosmopolitan*, giving out, as Wilmot instructed him to do, that he was now in receipt of an allowance from relatives at home.

Davie, contrary to what might have been expected, also remained. He had at first expressed his intention of returning once more to his old haunts among the large sheep runs, saying, “The squatters are no’ sae bad efter a’. Ye’re aye sure o’ a feed, a cheerfu’ fireside, an’ somewhaur to lie snug till the morn; and when ye ken the beat weel, ye aye hae a hamelike feelin’ on ye as ye gang up tae a station ye’re acquaint wi’ as the sun gaes doon.”

He continued, however, to linger about *Bloomsbury*, and even condescended to do some gardening and other odd jobs about the *Cosmopolitan*, and showed that he could work if he liked. He would occasionally shoulder his swag and make an excursion into the surrounding country for a day or two, partly, perhaps to satisfy the wandering habit so long indulged in, and partly, it may have been, to avoid the expense, however little, of living at the hotel. But he was not often long away from it, and while there seemed to keep an inquisitive eye on what was going on.

On one of his rambles into the country, when returning towards the township, late one afternoon, by a road which ran nearly parallel to that by which he and Westall had just approached it, he called at a cottage about three miles out. It stood back a little from the road; and there was an air of

neatness and comfort about it, which is often absent from newly-formed homes in the bush. A plot of ground in front and at the side of the house had been stumped and cultivated as a vegetable and fruit garden, nor was there wanting an attempt at the growth of flowers. There were a few beds of these in front of the verandah, and along it might be seen a climbing rose tree or two ; while at the side of the house, in a warm and sunny aspect, a young vine had been trained ; and round the outward boundary of the enclosure a shelter belt of the invariable macrocarpa and *pinus insignis* had been planted. The healthy appearance of all these, and their vigorous growth, gave evidence of richness of soil and of the care bestowed upon them by the owner, and promise of shade and shelter and heavily laden boughs in the not distant future. A neat dairy was to be seen at the back of the house ; and, farther removed, a comfortable cowshed and yards, where milking operations were then in progress.

Some logging up had evidently been done over the adjacent pasture ground, for it was less encumbered with timber than is generally to be seen in a new settlement.

Davie walked up to the door and was met by a woman with a face in which sweet motherly kindness was very apparent.

“I ha'e been trampin' a' day, mistress, an' am makin' for the toonship, but feckless wi' hunger, and juist wearied oot. Mebbe you wadna mind a moothfu' o' something to eat, an' leave to sit doon for a bit.”

“Indeed, you're welcome,” she replied, in a kind voice, as she led him into the kitchen. “There's no poor wanderer will be turned away hungry and tired from this door as long as there's a bit in the house, and I have my way in it. There's no telling who may be one's guest—and some of our own kin might be glad of a like kindness,” she added, with a slight tremor in her voice.

She sat Davie down to the best she had ready—light, white bread and sweet appetising butter ; she made tea for him and

cooked eggs, and placed tempting new scones in front of him and pressed him to eat. The latter was quite unnecessary on her part, for Davie was doing ample justice to the good things set before him.

CHAPTER VII.

OF the many hardships which the pioneers of settlement have to undergo, of the many difficulties and discomforts under which they must labour for at least some years after making a home in the wilderness, perhaps the larger share falls upon the woman. Shut in by roads or tracks that for the greater part of the year are almost or wholly impassable, at least for her; cut off, it may be, except at long intervals, from fellowship with those of her own sex; with household necessities of the roughest and barest description; devoid of luxuries of every kind, or of anything approaching luxuries; and often, indeed, wanting many of those conveniences which her more fortunate sisters deem necessary to existence—her lot is a hard one.

Her husband's occupation is out of doors. There is variety and change for him, but for her there is none. He mixes with some of his fellow-men almost every day. Wrapped in his oilskins he can face any weather; and, mounted on his strong horse of all work, can ride along any track. He attends the stock sales occasionally; business or pleasure may often lead him into the nearest township, where he meets old acquaintances or makes new ones, with whom he can exchange opinions upon topics of interest, or perhaps enjoy the friendly glass; but his wife's dull routine of household duties and family cares is seldom broken. If in the bush districts, the discomforts of the wet and mud of winter, and the annoyance of the mosquito pest during the hot nights of summer, are by her more sensitive nature more acutely felt. Yet she is, as a rule,

ever cheerful and uncomplaining. Brought up, it may be, under brighter influences, and amidst the comforts and refinements of a more advanced civilisation, which are so dear to her feminine nature, she yet hopefully enters on her new life and rough surroundings, and is her husband's true friend and helpmate. Those who have travelled into the most remote settlements will have found her even there—patient, brave, contented. Heaven's blessings be on such women.

Mrs. Robinson, for that was the name of Davie's entertainer, was a woman of this kind. She had cheerfully borne her share of the burden incident on breaking in their new home here, and was now beginning to meet with some reward. Her daughters, now growing up about her, assisted her in the more arduous duties of the household, or relieved her of them. Home comforts had begun to surround her. Though the road was not yet metalled all the way from the township, it was passable for a vehicle, and she could now occasionally visit her friends at a distance or entertain them in return. The house also has been added to, and, with its surroundings, improved in comfort and appearance.

Davie was making capital use of his time amongst the good things in front of him, and his plea of hunger was fully justified to the mind of Mrs. Robinson, who watched him with a pitying eye.

“ You'll have travelled a good deal in New Zealand?” she said, enquiringly.

“ As nuich, mem, as maist men,” Davie answered, with his mouth full. “ I hae tramped roon’ the maist pairt o’ the ither island, an’ ower a guid bit o’ this ane.”

“ I suppose you never met with a young man called Henry Robinson in your travels, did you ?”

“ What like was he ?” enquired Davie.

“ Oh, he was a nice boy,” she answered, gazing out through the window with a far away look. “ Tall for his age, with fair hair and bonny, laughing blue eyes, and a sweet, kindly face.

But what is my old head thinking about?—he'll be a man grown long ago. I always think of him as he was when he left me," she added, with the moisture showing in her eyes.

"Harry Robinson," said Davie, "I kenned ane o' the name weel, an' I'll hae nae doot it'll be the same. Mony's the jaunt him an' me hae had thegither. A deft han' he was wi' the shears, and at ony ither wark for the matter o' that—if he hadna' been he wadna' hae been lang in company wi' me."

"Oh, tell me, sir," the good woman said, sitting down and clasping her hands, "where do you think he will be now?"

"Weel, it's no' sae easy to say that," replied Davie, with some hesitation. "It was doon amang the stations, north o' Canterbury—Highfield, I'm thinkin'—that I saw him last, an' that'll be twa or three years ago, an' he was aye a bit o' a rambler like mysel', sae it's no' easy to say whaur he may be noo."

"Highfield; I'll remember that name," said Mrs. Robinson, speaking to herself.

The reader may as well be informed here that there was not a word of truth in the assertion that Davie had just made. In his rambles he might have met someone named Henry Robinson, for the name is a common one; but he had at this time no recollection whatever of having done so. He thought he might as well humour the mother in her anxious enquiries after her son, for by so doing he saw the possibility of solid advantage to himself. It was evident to him that the good woman, very hospitably inclined in any case, would always have a warm welcome for one who had brought her tidings of her long lost boy.

"Well, mother," said a cheerful voice from the doorway, and a man, under the middle height, with a good-humoured, rosy face, entered. This was the woman's husband, John, or, as he was usually called, Johnny, Robinson. "Well, mother," he said, "are you at the old trick again—found another poor swagger in want of a meal and a shakedown for

the night, I suppose. Blessed, if this thing gets abroad, there'll be a reg'lar run on us. We may as well stick up a signboard at once, 'Good accommodation for swaggers gratis'; only we'll have to enlarge the premises, and put the children to sleep in the cowshed."

"Don't mind him, sir; it's only his way," Mrs. Robinson said. "He has got a kind heart of his own. Oh, John! I have heard of our poor boy. This man knew him in the other island two or three years ago."

"Don't be too sure of that, mother," replied Robinson. "You know you thought you heard of him once or twice before, and nothing came of it. It's my belief these gentry just gammon you when they see you so anxious. The young rascal ran away to sea ever so many years ago, and you only heard from him once—after he got to Melbourne. He has made his fortune by this time, maybe, and wouldn't own us; or—or he may have gone under. Anyway, I don't suppose he's in New Zealand—t'other side of the world most likely, now that we're at this side."

"Oh, John, something tells me I shall see him yet," answered his wife. "We can advertise for him again—'last heard of at Highfield Station.'"

"Oh, bother Highfield Station and advertising," grumbled John, but in a good humoured way; "what with advertisements, mother, and free feeds for every fellow that comes along with a swag on his back, it's my belief we'll want to find a gold mine on the section, or maybe a silver one would do. If we go on like this we'll be having some impostor coming along and make believe he's the boy himself. I don't suppose you would know him yourself now, if you met him. It'll be ten or twelve years since you saw him last."

"Eleven years on the 13th of January last," Mrs. Robinson replied. "Trust me to know my boy again, though he'll be grown a fine, tall man now—he promised to be tall," she added, as if speaking to herself.

"Well, mother," said Robinson, "I don't think this chap bears much likeness to him, at any rate; a sturdy chap he is, though, and should never go to bed hungry if there's work to be done and he cared to do it. But it's my belief," he went on, addressing Davie, who had picked up his Scotch cap and was preparing to depart, "it's my belief you're the chap Maurice M'Keown was talking about just now. He says they had you at Mr. Ashwin's wharé the other night, and that he knew you in the other island—'always looking for the job you don't want to find,' he says; 'lives on a loaf that never was baked, and only speaks the truth when a lie won't do as well.'"

"M'Keown's a leear himself, if he says so," replied Davie, warmly.

"You can tell him so to his face, then, if you like, for he's out here now," Robinson remarked. "He tells me, mother, that those yearlings we have missed have come out through the bush, and are on Mr. Ashwin's grass now, where, he says, we can leave them for a bit if we like. He's over in the shed now, milking the last cow for Mary."

Davie had jumped up, and now took his leave, thanking the mistress of the house—how could he help it—in words which for once may have had the ring of sincerity about them.

Our acquaintance, M'Keown, had come over as mentioned by Robinson. Indeed, it may be said that he let slip no possible opportunity of paying a visit here.

Robinson's farm, as has been stated, fronted on a road running nearly parallel to that on which Ashwin's was situated. These roads were here about a mile and a half apart, but the two properties adjoined for some little distance at the back, where some bush was still standing. The contract which Flash Harry and his mates had taken from Ashwin extended to Robinson's boundary; while on Robinson's section the last remaining block of standing

bush had been already felled earlier in the season. Maurice at times, therefore, had occasion in the ordinary course of things to find his way across to the neighbouring farm; and when none such arose, he was very apt to make occasion of his own, for, truth to tell, the bright eyes of Mary Robinson were the all-sufficient attraction that drew him thither. On Sundays, too, when the roads were dry and the weather fine, and Mary likely to walk into church in the township, Maurice was almost sure to take this route there also. He was known to do the same even on week days, if he found it necessary to visit Bloomsbury, and had the audacity to say that this way was about as near as the other for him, and was much more pleasant to travel by. Of course, by this route he could have a look round the sheep in Ashwin's back paddock on the way in or out, and this, no doubt, was a very great advantage which it possessed over the other.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE fact was, Maurice was very much in love, and he knew it.

His was not one of those cases of which we read sometimes in novels where a man or woman, a young man or maiden, has been in love for a long time, and doesn't know it, only making the discovery at last, very much to his or her own surprise. Maurice was in love, and he knew it. Instances of the opposite form, in which the tender passion has made us its victims, while we remain all unconscious of the fact, are, to say the least, exceedingly rare. We are more likely, perhaps, to err in another direction, and imagine ourselves over head and ears in a sea of love, when we have only, as it were, wet our feet; to believe that a name, a form, has been stamped indelibly on our heart, when the impress is really of the most transitory kind; to deem that the disease which we suffer from will be mortal in its effects, while in reality it is only a slight and temporary indisposition.

If we are apt to be deceived as to the intensity of our own feelings, how much more likely are we to fail in making a correct estimate of those of the object of our amorous regard. Here, indeed, love may exist and remain undetected, so skilfully is it hidden from us under the cloak of indifference or coldness. The chaste Belinda may have our manly form enshrined as her bosom's lord, while we, wretched with envy, see admirers more fortunate, as we suppose, bask

in the sunshine of her favour, we being left for the time, as we foolishly think, to shiver in the shade.

Yet, in judging of the feelings of the object of our own ardent desires, we are perhaps oftener given to take the opposite and more hopeful, though it may be, equally incorrect view. The fair Maria's welcoming smile and cordial deportment are joyfully seized upon as fuel for our hopes, while that hateful fellow Judkins is the lucky man after all.

Maurice was in love, and this was not to be wondered at, for, truth to tell, Mary Robinson's bright eyes and sunny face were attractive enough to bring under love's sway any young fellow whose heart was capable of being touched at all. Fair she was, of medium height, of well developed form, with an easy supple grace in walk and bearing where buoyant health was manifest in every movement; with honest, truthful eyes from which mirth and laughter were in the frequent habit of looking out. Her face and hands had been kissed by the sun oftener perhaps than a city miss would care to submit to.

She had been milking, for though latterly this necessary work fell to the other members of the family, yet occasionally she gave a helping hand if any of the others were too busy to attend to it or were away from home. A rough calico overall, or something of the kind, was thrown over her ordinary dress, but even this, embellished as it was with some little ornamentation which feminine taste ever finds room for, looked neat and becoming.

"It was very kind of you, Mr. M'Keown, to milk that cow for me. She is rather hard to milk," she said, as Maurice finished, and was preparing to carry the bucket to the dairy.

"It was far kinder of you to let me," he replied. "You know there couldn't be a greater pleasure in life for me than doing a service for you. I would think it kinder still, though, if you would call me 'Maurice'; I'm not used to be called 'Mr.', and don't like it—especially from you. It sounds too,

stand-off and distant like. I'd rather be on a more familiar footing with you, you see, Mary, my dear—I have known you long enough to call you that without offence, I hope?" he added.

"Perhaps I think you look best at a distance, and mean to keep you there. 'Distance lends enchantment to the view' sometimes, you know," replied Mary, laughing.

"Sure, that would be the death of me," Maurice answered; "dead through distance—killed at long range. I would rather be sun-struck than frozen to death—remember that, Mary. Kill me if you will, but let it be with kindness. But here we are at the dairy, and you must show me which pan to strain the milk into."

"You can strain it without shutting the door, though," said Mary, after they had entered; and then, almost immediately, she continued, "Don't be foolish, Maurice—Billy is outside there watching you! You'll upset the milk with your nonsense!"

"Foolish is it, and nonsense?" replied Maurice, after a few seconds, during which the reader can guess what he had been doing—"it's the wisest thing I have done to-day, or since I was here last. Blessings on the man who discovered kissing, and told the others about it. Bother Billy!" he added, "I'll soon make it all right with him."

Billy was Mary's youngest brother, a boy of ten or eleven, who attended school in the township, and who that afternoon had not long returned from it.

"I saw you!" said that youth, as they came out; "I know what you have been doing—Oh, Mary!"

"Look here, Billy!" said Maurice, in friendly tones, "I saw a beauty of a two-bladed knife in at Buncombe's store, the other day; and it will be yours the very next time I go in—that is, if you and I keep on good terms, which, of course, we can't possibly do if you go telling anyone what you thought you saw or heard in the dairy just now."

Mary, in the meantime, had fled rather precipitately into

the house, encountering Davie as he was coming out. He "glowered" at her, as if he had never seen a pretty girl before.

"Hallo, my noble Scot!" exclaimed M'Keown, as soon as he caught sight of him. "What luck? Have you found the job to suit your liking yet? Try and fix him up with a job, Mr. Robinson, and get your name up for doing what no one else could ever manage to do. If he could be dressed up as a Highlander, and set down at the door of a tobacconist's shop, with a long pipe in his mouth all day, that would be the sort of billet for him. You might think over that, Davie, and apply at some of the shops in Wellington."

"I'll mebbe apply this stick to the tap o' yer heid, if ye gie me ony mair o' yer imperence! Mind yer ain business, an' let ither folk mind theirs," said Davie, striding away.

"Just the way of the world," remarked Maurice; "the giver of good advice generally goes without thanks."

"He has been telling the missus he knew our boy down South," said Robinson, who had come out and joined M'Keown—"our boy that we haven't heard of for many a year—leastwise, somebody of the same name, that appeared to answer the description."

"After finding out all about him, I suppose," replied Maurice; "what he was like, and all that. I shouldn't believe a word of it—Davie's a notorious liar."

"Oh, I don't put any faith in what he says myself," Robinson said. "It's my belief he just made up the yarn to please her. As likely as not the boy is dead and buried long ago, or at the bottom of the sea; but his mother still believes she'll see him yet, and has got it into her head that he's somewhere in New Zealand. We shouldn't have been out here at all, I expect, if it hadn't been for him—not that I've ever had any reason to feel sorry for coming. It's a fine country for them that aren't afraid to work, and are blessed with health and strength, as we have been. It's pleasant to think one has got a bit of land of one's own, and not in the power of the land-

lords, as we used to be. You're getting some more bush down on that section of yours in the Aratahi Block, I believe, Maurice?"

"I have just let fifty acres to some chaps, and hope to get down another fifty or a hundred acres next season if all's well. The road is likely to be made by that time," Maurice answered, and then added, "Oh, while I think of it, those bushfallers of Mr. Ashwin's were asking where they could get a regular supply of good butter, and I told them I thought they might get it from you here. They are decent fellows, I think, and the money should be all right, but Mr. Frank will see that you're paid."

"No doubt that will be right enough," said Robinson, "but the mother looks after all that. You had better see if she can spare any. It's my belief she would make them welcome to as much as they could use for nothing if they would only spin her such a yarn as your friend the Scotchman did about having met her boy. Poor mother! He was our eldest, you know, and got into a bit of a scrape after he left school a while, and maybe I was a bit hard on him at the time. He was a fine, dashing boy, and got on well at his schooling too, and was always talking about seeing the world and making his way in it; and he went. Our second boy, who was a steady-going chap, died soon after the other left. Well, his mother got a letter from him from Melbourne, as you may have heard, telling her he was going to stay out there, and most likely go over to New Zealand, and not to think there was anything wrong if she didn't hear from him again for a while. He never wrote again—never, at any rate, as long as we stayed at home, and we left there seven or eight years ago. Poor mother, she was always asking about New Zealand, and finding out something good about it, and telling me what a fine country it must be for a man with a family, till at last I made up my mind to come out here, and that pleased her, I can tell you. It's my belief she thinks more of the boy that's

away from her than of the children she's got about her, and they're good children, every one of them. She doesn't fret or worry, as you know, but I can see he's seldom out of her thoughts. But," he added, "you'll stay and have some tea now that you're here, won't you?"

"Thank you, I will," said Maurice, gladly. "The track is not the best to follow after dark, but I'll manage to find it."

Maurice stayed, and, when he was going away, if Mary happened to be outside the door when he took leave of the others, who will blame him if he said good-bye to her all by herself there, and was rather a long time about it?

CHAPTER IX.

DAVIE became very intimate with O'Byrne during the latter's visits to the township, never neglecting an opportunity of making friendly advances, and even found out his wharé, and spent a night there much to the annoyance, apparently, of old Dan, who was even more crabbed and uncommunicative than usual; the production by Davie of a bottle of Brasch's "special blend" not having much effect in mollifying him even. This extravagance on Davie's part was a most unusual proceeding for him, and in order to meet this and other outlay he must have drawn on some reserve fund in his possession, for though he had done a little work for Brasch he had got little for it.

Again, a second time he visited O'Byrne's, and on this occasion old Dan made himself still more disagreeable than before, and showed plainly how unwelcome Davie's presence in the hut was. O'Byrne, too, seemed less hospitably inclined.

During the evening he expressed his intention of going cattle hunting in the morning.

"We're nearly out of mate, ye see; and, faith, it's toime Jacob himself had a bit agin. He'll be asther thinkin' I've forgot him entoirely. Av we don't give him mate he'll give us no whisky; and I'm thinkin' we could do with a bottle or two agin. Eh, Dan?"

Dan gave a grunt of acquiescence, or dissent, for it would be hard to say which it was meant to convey, and then said:

"Begorra, it's a license for the wharé here we'll be afther wantin' soon, so that we may be able to provoide dacently for the convaynience and entertainment av thravellers. Faith, an' it's somethin' av the koind we'll be needin' soon," he concluded, with a dark look at Davie.

The latter now produced a bottle of whisky from his swag, and through its influence matters began to take a slightly more agreeable turn.

Davie left very early on the following morning, with the avowed purpose of making for the township again; but after he had passed out of O'Byrne's clearing, he turned aside into the standing bush, and, keeping within the shelter of it, came back to within a short distance of the wharé which he had just left. Here he took up a position from which, while hidden himself, he could see the hut and its surroundings. He watched O'Byrne and Dan leave shortly afterwards with dogs and guns; and judging that the pursuit on which they were engaged would keep them away till late in the afternoon, he selected the most comfortable spot that he could find, made a couch of ferns and lay down and smoked his pipe at his ease, and subsequently indulged in a sound sleep for some hours. It was midday when he roused himself, opened his tucker-bag, and made a fair meal of what he found there.

He did not boil his billy, being afraid lest the smoke from the fire might betray his presence, but contented himself with a drink from a small stream that ran in a gully near by. After this he kept watch; and towards evening saw O'Byrne and Dan return, heavily laden with portions of a beast which they had killed. Still Davie waited and watched.

His patience was becoming exhausted, when, as darkness set in, he was just able to discern them as, having again left the hut, they came in the direction in which he himself lay concealed.

He observed as they passed close by him that old Dan carried a lantern, as yet unlit, while O'Byrne had in his hand

what appeared to be a coil of rope. After they had proceeded for some little distance into the bush, where daylight had entirely disappeared, the lantern was lighted; and Davie, who by this time was making a stealthy attempt to follow, muttered to himself :

“Ecod, I hae ye noo, or I’m mistaken, my bonnie lads.”

He was now able to advance with somewhat less difficulty, for the light showed the locality for the time being of the others, but he had to be very careful not to make much noise in threading his way through the supple jacks and undergrowth which at times impeded his progress.

O’Byrne and his companion made better headway than Davie, as they knew their ground and were following a sort of track, ill-defined indeed, and to a stranger hardly discernible even in the daylight, but by these men, who were acquainted with every natural feature of the locality, capable of being followed in the dark with the aid of the lantern. This path Davie found once or twice, and as it was at least clear of supple jacks, he could get along with greater facility while upon it, but invariably lost it again after a few minutes’ travelling.

O’Byrne and Dan proceeded in this way for about a quarter of a mile, generally ascending as they advanced, till they reached a part of the section where the ground became steeper and more broken. Here a large creek, coming down from the ranges at the back, obliquely intersected O’Byrne’s land, and at this place ran through a deep gorge which the water in the course of ages had channelled out of the rock. The sides of this gorge were so precipitous in general that it was only at one or two places that it was possible for a person to descend to the bed of the stream; while it was well nigh impossible to follow the creek itself along its rocky bottom, where waterfall and pool succeeded each other for the greater part of its course.

The sides of the cañon, where not too precipitous, were clothed with creeping vines and shrubs that had found root-

hold in the crevices of the rocks and on the ledges and less abrupt declivities.

Having reached a point where the roaring of the stream could be distinctly heard as it tumbled down its rocky channel, but while still a short distance away from its steep bank, Dan and O'Byrne separated a little so as to guard against forming by a succession of footprints anything like a beaten track, and, having reached the edge, extinguished the light. Old Dan, being well acquainted with every inch of the ground, here proceeded cautiously to feel his way down a steep and rock-strewn slope, thickly covered with undergrowth, to where it met the precipice that rose almost sheer from the stream below. Here a rata tree had found root and reared its majestic bulk high above the roaring torrent, over which it partly leaned. On the up-stream side of the tree the wall of rock rose unscaleable to a much greater height, there being no such slope as that by which old Dan had found his way down. A ledge of rock, however, ran along the face from below where the rata grew, affording precarious foothold to anyone bold enough to venture along it.

Round one of the roots of this rata tree three or four lengths of fencing wire had been wound, and the ends, twisted together into a sort of rope, hung downward for five or six feet, reaching nearly to the ledge below. Dan, laying hold of this rope, lowered himself cautiously on to the ledge, and edging his way along it, assisting himself in his progress by laying hold on some tough vines and creepers which hung from above, and on some artificial supports which had been affixed at one or two places, gained at length a wider space, and, passing inwards round the point of a projecting rock, reached the low entrance to a cave.

He seemed to know his way perfectly here, for without striking a light (Dan was a particularly cautious old gentleman) he laid his hand on something which had evidently been placed handy, just within the entrance, and sat down and waited.

Meanwhile O'Byrne, when he parted from Dan, had proceeded a little higher up, to where a tree threw its arms over the face of the cliffs. Having attached a stone to one end of the rope which he had brought with him, he succeeded, after one or two attempts, in throwing it over one of these limbs which visibly stood out between him and the sky. He then slowly lowered the rope till the shaking of it from below warned him that it had reached its destination. After waiting a few seconds, and the rope having been again violently shaken, he hauled on it, and, after pulling steadily for a little time, he reached out a hooked stick, and drawing it again towards him, safely landed a small keg. This procedure was repeated a second time, and then the rope was drawn down from the limb, and Dennis stood waiting the reappearance of his comrade.

The reader will have guessed by this time what the contents of the kegs were, and why so much secrecy was observed by O'Byrne and Old Dan in the work of the night. These men were the owners of a private still, and the kegs contained whisky—the real “mountain dew.”

In his early days Dan had had experience in the manufacture of “potheen” in Old Ireland ; and when, after many vicissitudes in life, he had joined his relative in New Zealand, his practical eye saw how the cave in the section might be profitably utilised. Indeed, it is not unlikely that the section was acquired subsequent to the discovery of the cave, and after a good deal of exploration in various localities had been made with illicit distillation as the chief end in view.

The cave itself was eminently adapted for the purpose. It was completely hidden from the observation of anyone traversing the bush in the neighbourhood, as it could be seen from no direction, the view of the entrance being blocked by a jutting point of rock and by some ake-ake bushes and other shrubby growth. Though not of large dimensions, there was yet ample room for the requirements of distillation, even in a

much larger way than was carried on. The still used was of the smallest, and stood in one corner over a rude fireplace; and the tubs were not numerous or large, having been formed out of two or three barrels cut in halves, and smuggled up at various times. A stream of ice-cold water ran through the cave, and was diverted so as to run, when required, continuously into one of these tubs, where was coiled the "worm," from which the spirit, having been condensed, slowly trickled, at first in the form of "low wines," but after a second distillation, as the pure "mountain dew."

Though the cave was not large as far as one was able to penetrate, yet some rents and crevices in the rocks, opening out perhaps into larger chambers, ran an unknown distance under the hill, and through these the smoke found egress, ultimately getting vent far away through cracks and fissures to the surface.

It may be remembered that a little before the date of this story some men who had been pig-hunting, or who had lost their way for a time in the bush, reported the discovery of an incipient volcano in this locality. They averred that they had seen smoke issuing from a rocky knob which they had crossed; but their tale was generally disbelieved; nor could they indicate or afterwards again find the particular spot where the remarkable natural phenomenon was to be seen. The smoke that they saw came from the fire by which Old Dan sat and sucked his pipe half a mile away. He was careful to use only the driest wood ever afterwards.

The disposal of the spirit after its manufacture is, of course, always the most difficult part of the business; and as yet O'Byrne had been able to deal only with the landlord of the *Cosmopolitan*, who, indeed, was privy to the undertaking from the start, and had helped to provide the plant, and continued to supply most of the materials used in the manufacture. He kept a large stock of poultry; and out of the large quantity of barley and other grain, procured

ostensibly for feeding these, O'Byrne got his supply, returning with it in the dark nights. Sugar was more easily obtained. But Old Dan was a man of resource and well up to the business, and could utilise many other products in making the spirit—potatoes, beetroot, maize—and a considerable quantity of these, especially potatoes, were usually grown on the plot of ground which had been partly stumped and cultivated round the wharé.

The kegs of whisky were brought into the Cosmopolitan by O'Byrne on the old black mare, each one in a sack, which also generally contained some joints of beef or pork, the products of the chase.

The whisky thus obtained by Brasch was mixed or blended—his “special blend”—with about equal parts of whisky procured in the ordinary way from some wholesale house; but it so happened that he had run short of the latter on the occasion of Davie's first visit, and in consequence it was nearly all the pure “potheen” that that individual had smacked his lips over. His suspicions were aroused by its flavour, and were strengthened by some other circumstances connected with O'Byrne's visits to the house, and his stay there; and he determined to watch and discover, if possible, if any private still was at work, and if so, where. He judged that if his suspicions were well founded, and he could make himself master of the secret, there would be some real and tangible advantages accruing to himself, for it would be necessary for those engaged in the business either to buy his silence or take him into partnership. The latter alternative he viewed with a favourable eye; the life would suit him, as he said to himself, “juist doon to the grun'—no' ower much wark to dae, my ain boss, and whisky for the drinkin'.” Could he have looked into the future and have seen what was written there, he would have fled from the place with a face white and scared.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN the light which Davie had followed was put out, he was at a loss what to do. Under the shadow of the tree-tops, the place where he now stood was as dark as pitch; and if he proceeded in the direction in which he had been going, he might stumble upon, or at least be heard by, the others whom he was most anxious to avoid. On the other hand, as he could hear the noise of falling water, he was inclined to think that O'Byrne and his companion might probably have reached the steep banks of a stream, and descended into it, taking the light with them. He could hear no voices, and after a little consideration he decided to creep forward with extreme caution and reconnoitre. His progress was necessarily very slow, and as it appeared as he advanced that he was getting nearer and nearer to the stream, and must now be close upon it, and still no light visible, he stopped, apprehensive lest in the darkness he might fall over some cliff; and, as he judged that the two whom he was following would be sure to return by the way in which they went, he thought it best to wait where he then was for some time at least. He had scarcely resolved on this course when he was startled by the noise of someone moving quite near to him, and the voice of old Dan calling out:

“Streck a light, Dinnis, or I'll niver foind ye. It's as black as the devil himself down here.”

A light was struck and the lantern lit, a chain or two farther

up ; and Davie, afraid of discovery, darted to the side of the nearest tree, which happened to be a large rimu, behind which he found room to screen himself. But in moving he made some noise, which reached the ears of Old Dan.

“ What the ——’s that ? ” he hissed, savagely ; “ there’s somethin’ stirrin’ here, Dennis.”

“ Och, sure, an’ it’ll only be a bat or an owl, or maybe an owld sow out for a sthroll,” replied Dennis. “ Come along and let’s get back. Ye’ll moind I’ve to git into the township before the moon rises, an’ that’ll be betune twilve an’ wan.”

“ Kape yer eye open, thin, whin ye get there,” Dan replied, as he clambered up to join the other. “ I’m thinkin’ that b—— loafin’ Scotchman’s up to no good, or what brings him sniffin’ up in this quarter, where he knows there’s no work ? ”

“ Faith, an’ it isn’t work he’s asther, at all at all—devil a matther what road he travels. It’s aise an’ a full belly suits him best.”

Through a break in the undergrowth, Davie saw each of them shoulder a keg and prepare to start homewards. He chuckled to himself, when he saw what they carried : “ Ecod, I was richt, after a’. Davie Dunlop’s no’ sic a fule as some folk may think. But, deil tak’ them, if they’re no’ comin’ richt doon on tap o’ me here ! ”

He grasped the cudgel which he carried, and pressed closely against the trunk of the tree, while Dan and O’Byrne passed by only a few feet from the other side of it.

Davie followed the light at a safe distancee, as before ; and though, as he proceeded, he was left still farther behind through his not having the same knowledge of the ground as those in front, and being particularly careful lest a sudden trip or plunge on his part should betray his presence, he yet reached the clearing shortly after they did ; found his swag after a short search, struck down to the road line, and stepped out at a brisk pace along it towards Bloomsbury.

It was after midnight when O’Byrne reached the township.

The night was still dark, but already a faint gleam of light was just discernible in the eastern sky, showing that the moon would soon rise. The *Cosmopolitan* was quiet and in darkness.

It was not so on every other night at this time, for even at this late hour lights might often be seen in the bar, and loud voices heard in angry altercation; or drunken tones taking up the burden of a song, much to the annoyance of those who, less hilariously inclined, had sought their beds and sleep at an earlier hour. Business may have been less brisk on this night, or Jacob may have closed the bar sharp at eleven o'clock, and refused to sell another drop of liquor, as he sometimes did when in the expectation of receiving a visit from O'Byrne.

Dennis led the horse round by the back way to the door of a small outhouse, and then tapped lightly at the window of the landlord's bedroom, which was on the ground-floor. Shortly afterwards the back door of the hotel was quietly opened, and Jacob came out.

"Vas dat you, Dennis?" he whispered, as he came near.

"It's meself it is," replied Dennis, in a low voice. "Ye'll put the mate in th' same ould place, I suppose?—now thin, stiddy, an' aff it comes—as foine a bit av beef as iver ye tasted"

They carried the sacks into the small store-house, and were preparing to open them.

"Ve vill hang up dat meat here, und ven dat ish done I vill carry der lush inside, mineself, while you turn out der horse," Jacob said.

"Could I no' gie ye a han', ma freends?" whispered a voice in the doorway, and, looking up, they could there dimly distinguish the headpiece of Davie.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Brasch, "it surely vas not mine dear friend Davie come back vonst more to see me? Und ver haf you sprung from? No help, danks; ve haf finish now. It is only mine friend, Dennis, bringen me some beef—likes to bringen it down in der cool, like you know."

"And what might be in the twa wee kegs?" queried Davie, still in a low voice, as he struck a match. "It's nae use, mates," he went on, "I ken the hale business. I saw thae same kegs brocht oot o' the bush no' mony hours ago; an' I could tak' ye to the spot whaur the stuff was made."

"You — — —! I'll be afther breakin' yer head for ye, for a snakin', skulkin' son of a say cook," O'Byrne exclaimed.

"Hoot, mon, dinna fash yersel'," answered Davie. "Ye hae had a nice wee bit game on here on the sly for this while, I'm thinkin'; an' if I hae got to the bottom o' it, wha's to blame me? But yer secret's safe wi' me. Ye'll be wantin' anither pairtnner, I'm thinkin', an' ye'll find a gye usefu' ane in me."

"Not anoder vord, mine friends," whispered Brasch; "ve vill haf more partners dan ish good, if ve goes on mit our talk und quarrellings here. Ve vill go insides: I vill let you in on de quiet dis night, like you know, Dennis, und not haf you knock me up mit noise und clatters, like you do sometimes when ve haf fixed up everytings outsides."

And so it was that Davie was taken into partnership. The matter was settled when they met inside, over a few glasses of the "special blend."

"Mine Gott!" said Jacob, slapping his thigh, as if a thought had just struck him; "vat vill Old Dan say? How vill he like dis new partner, I vonders?"

Old Dan certainly did not take at all kindly to the new arrangement. His evil-looking face became more evil-looking still, and deep and terrible were the curses that he uttered when he first heard of it.

Davie, however, was found useful. Being broad-backed and sturdy of limb, and used to the road, he could carry down a couple of good-sized jars comfortably in his swag; and on the return journey sometimes a bag of sugar or forty or fifty pounds of grain might be wrapped up in it. His coming and going, too, at intervals, was not likely to excite suspicion, as he was known to be a rambler.

He would talk in a vague way, at times, about going back to his old life among the stations, but the life that he was leading suited his inclinations too well to admit of there being any presentl ikeihood of his doing so.

CHAPTER XI

ON a pleasant afternoon, about two months after the date of the opening of this narrative, the girl who has been mentioned as having lately arrived in the district with her father, and who was, indeed, the same that Davie had drawn Westall's attention to as they journeyed towards the township on the morning in which they left Ashwin's wharé, was riding into Bloomsbury in company with her brother, a boy about eleven years old.

The riders having traversed at a slow pace the unmetalled portion of the road, extending for half a mile or more from the house, started off at a brisk canter as soon as they reached the metal. The young lady sat her horse fairly well, though she was evidently not quite at home in the saddle, and lacked that skill in the management of her horse and that ease and confidence on horseback which are only acquired by constant practice, and in which colonial girls as a rule excel.

Her horse, which had been taken over along with other stock on the place when the property was bought, was by no means a perfect lady's hack. Though quiet and strong and useful, he needed a rather too frequent application of the whip to be pleasant, especially when on the way from home and ridden by one who, he felt, had not full mastery over him.

“Give it to him, Maud; lay it into him!” cried the boy. “Bob's a lazy beggar, and wants a lot of touching up at the start. Keep him up to it now the road's good.”

Thus encouraged, Miss Elwood—for that was the young lady's name—gave the horse a cut or two with her whip, but with less vigour and force withal than her brother thought the occasion required; and they proceeded at a fair pace for a quarter of a mile or more, when Bob thought it was high time to again indulge in a walk.

"That was a good canter, wasn't it, Ted?" Miss Elwood said, her face glowing with the exercise. "Good Bob," she said, patting the horse's neck. "What a pity it is that you are just a little bit rough and won't canter along nicely without me being obliged to hit you with the whip."

"I could make the beggar go," said Ted, flourishing a lithe supplejack with which he was furnished, and which, doubtless, the pony that he was riding had felt the weight of. "Bob's too knowing an old stager for a girl to do much with," he added, with importance. "Girls don't know how to manage a horse. If a horse does get into a good canter, a girl begins at once to feel if her back hair isn't coming down, and, of course, a horse thinks he ought to pull up till she finds out."

"Mine's all right, isn't it, Ted?" said his sister, putting, however, her hand up so as to make sure.

Her wealth of brown hair with a golden sheen in it was all right, fastened up, as it was, in many a mysterious coil.

She was about twenty-two years of age, of a sweet and gentle cast of countenance, over which, however, and in the depths of her soft, grey eyes, a pensive look would steal at times, as if her young life had been clouded and chastened by a heavy sorrow. But a natural brightness of disposition and the glad impulses of youth and health were ever ready to banish this pensive shadow from a face where smiles, and laughter too, found a fair and fit playground.

Bob was after a little urged into a canter again, and after two or three spurts of this kind they reached at length the outskirts of the township.

"Stir him up now, Maud, and let us have a good canter

down the main street, just to show the people how well you can ride," said Ted.

But Maud was not to be prevailed upon as yet to display her skill in the way suggested before the eyes of Bloomsbury, and would not go out of a walk.

"That is Miss Elwood," said Mr. Ponsonby after the riders had passed Wilmot's office, outside of which he and two or three others were lounging. "Now, didn't I tell you she was a deuced nice-looking girl, though, as I said, not quite my style."

"Sour grapes, Ponsie—because she wouldn't return your ardent glances, or cast her eyes, in fact, in your direction at all, the day she arrived here with her father," said Spalding, who had just walked over from the Bank after closing it for the day.

"Not a bit of it—quite out there, my dear boy," replied Ponsonby. "Not smitten in that quarter at all—heart-whole; though, egad, I've seen a girl lately worth two of this one—stunning, by Jove—not exactly a lady, you know, but a sweet little woman with a face all sunshine, who's going to help me to break the monotony of life here if I can manage it. Egad."

"Look out for a rustic lover then, my boy," said Spalding. "We'll be having you brought home on a stretcher some of these days, battered and bruised beyond recognition, the result of the jealous rage of one of the fair one's admirers, and serve you right, too.

'Where shall the traitor rest, he the deceiver,
Who would win woman's breast, ruin and leave her?'"

"Oh, come now, that's going too far, egad," drawled Ponsonby. "My intentions may be strictly honourable, for all you know; and as for the wrath of angry lovers, why I can take care of myself if it comes to that. But why don't you go in and capture Miss Elwood yourself, Spalding? Get

the Bank authorities to erect palatial premises for the Bloomsbury manager ; give up hotel life, marry and settle down, and live happily ever afterwards—not forgetting to entertain your old friends pretty often, of course ; or, Wilmot, there's a chance for you—prime of life, plenty of tin, you need a wife, go in and win."

"Too old, my dear sir ; too old," replied Wilmot. "My chances have gone by ; besides, I have always liked to keep a free foot, and be able to come and go on short notice. The trammels of matrimony wouldn't have suited me at all, and I don't think I shall draw them round me now. Don't let me, however, discourage any young gentleman who is desirous of entering upon that blissful state. But," he added, "I see this Miss Elwood—Elwood, I knew a young lady of the same name about a quarter of a century ago—I see she has picked up a cavalier at the Post Office in young Ashwin, who evidently means to ride home with her ; so Spalding, or Ponsonby, if either of you has serious intentions of entering for the prize, you will probably find a rival in that quarter."

Ashwin had met Miss Elwood before. He had called on her father soon after his arrival, and having found that Mr. Elwood had little or no knowledge of farming as carried on in New Zealand, and was almost wholly unacquainted with the management of stock, had freely placed his advice and his assistance at his neighbour's service at any time he might require them ; and he had already found occasion to make several friendly visits. Mr. Elwood had a hired man on the farm, and Ted was beginning to make himself useful in riding round the sheep, and in other respects ; but there were questions of stock management upon which Mr. Elwood was glad to consult with anyone of experience, and dealings with them for which he was grateful for help given. Ashwin, indeed, after the first visit or two, seemed very well pleased to be useful to the new-comers, and neglected no opportunity of making a friendly call.

He had been away at his father's place for a day or two, and now, returning, met Miss Elwood and her brother at the Bloomsbury Post Office ; and they subsequently rode homeward together.

Bob, his head having been turned towards home, and incited perhaps to some degree of rivalry by the presence of Ashwin's horse, stepped out more freely.

"Maud couldn't get the lazy beggar along at all, going in," said her brother.

"Oh, I am sure he didn't do so badly," Miss Elwood said. "We got along quite fast enough, Mr. Ashwin, for I am not a very capable horsewoman yet. But Bob does seem to move along much better now—I suppose it is because he is going homeward—you knowing Bob."

"You must try my horse some day, Miss Elwood," Ashwin replied, "he is very quiet and easy in his paces. My sisters sometimes ride him when I am down at home—the eldest rode him after the hounds once, and liked him as well as her own, she said. He carried her over anything she put him at ; and she is pretty daring in the saddle."

"Oh, indeed, I should be frightened to trust myself on him, inexperienced as I am ; though it is very good of you to offer him to me, Mr. Ashwin," Miss Elwood replied. "Bob is better suited to my humble attainments as a horsewoman, I am afraid ; and I must be satisfied with him."

"By the way," Ashwin went on, "my sisters talk of riding up here with one or two others next Thursday ; and may call on you if they have time. They will be returning the same day—staying at a friend's house for the night both on the way up and in going back. It will be a fifty miles ride for the day, but they won't mind that."

"Oh, what a distance ! It is quite far enough for me to ride into the township and back," Miss Elwood said, and then she added, in a tone in which a little sadness was perceptible, with some embarrassment, and blushing deeply as she

proceeded, "It is very kind of you, Mr. Ashwin, and of them, that they should think of calling on me, but—but my father has a disinclination for society, and, indeed—indeed—it is perhaps better that we should not—I mean—oh, Mr. Ashwin I know that I must appear ungrateful—but we are anxious to remain very quiet here."

"Forgive me," he said, "I would not do anything to cause you a moment's unpleasantness; but I thought you would like to make acquaintance with some girls of your own age, and hoped that you might have made friends of my sisters—I am sure that they would have found you to be everything that they could wish for."

Ashwin was puzzled at this apparent desire to shun companionship. It could not be pride on the part of Miss Elwood that gave rise to this, for there was not the slightest approach to that feeling disclosed in the tone in which the objection was uttered; but there was rather, indeed, he thought, a trace of self-depreciation mingled with the hesitating and confused manner in which that objection was expressed.

It must, he argued, be her father, who, in a selfish spirit of seclusion, had shown a disinclination to his daughter making girl friends. And yet the old man seemed to regard her with the fondest affection, to follow her every movement with loving eyes. Perhaps it was this more than ordinary degree of affectionate regard, which indeed appeared mutual, that made him jealous of any other influences which might weaken or estrange in the least the devoted attachment with which his daughter waited on him.

Yet, if this were so, Ashwin could hardly understand how Mr. Elwood should have looked with no disfavour on his presence during the few visits that he had made to the house, but had welcomed him in a most friendly, though quiet way.

These visits were made, of course, in connection with

advice and assistance relative to the farm ; still Ashwin thought, and smiled to himself as he thought, that, if the old man's jealous care over his daughter was so great, there might be more danger to his peace of mind in the visits of a young and not bad-looking fellow than in those of the young fellow's sisters. He was, therefore, still much puzzled, but determined that he should at least not discontinue his visits to his neighbours till he saw clearly that his presence was not wanted.

CHAPTER XII.

THEY were now opposite Morton's house, and as they passed they saw him smoking on the verandah. It was a small four-roomed place. Another cottage of two rooms was situated a considerable distance in the rear. Here his men slept and cooked their meals, while he sometimes cooked for himself and sometimes had his meals brought in to him.

He had tried the services of a married couple for a short time once, but soon parted with them, and did not repeat the experiment, preferring, so some of his detractors said, the discomforts of housekeeping on his own behalf to having the hateful presence of a woman near him. Apparently well off in this world's goods, he lived here a solitary life, not seeming anxious to mix with his fellow men, and yet not actually shunning them. He subscribed to most of the leading magazines and reviews, and his library, though not large, was select, comprising, however, in great part works dealing with or touching upon abstruse metaphysical questions, and the deeper and more sombre aspect of things. Cynical and misanthropical generally in his utterances, he was not, perhaps, so much so at heart as he appeared to be; but a more kindly and generous nature lay covered deep within than most people gave him credit for.

“Caught on,” he said to himself, as he saw Miss Elwood and Ashwin ride past. Ted had scampered on in front, being dissatisfied latterly at the slow pace at which the others were travelling; “Caught on—‘The everlasting *to be* which *hath*

been.' Here is this girl, only a month or two in the place, now, I have no doubt, using all her arts, displaying all her wares, to catch another lover. And the young fool Ashwin catches on: or he it is, perhaps, who is seeking to make a conquest—another scalp in his belt—regardless of heart aches or heart breaks. There are men to be found with this womanish nature in them, I believe. Well, well, perhaps I wrong them, for both the fools may be now in love with each other, or shortly reach that stupid state; may even marry yet—worst fate of all, perhaps—and grind out the gruesome thing called life together to the better end. Oh, the farce of it all. Laughter-provoking it would be, were it not so sad. And still the procession of fools goes on from generation to generation, each individual atom big in its own consciousness, jostling and scheming for its own little advancement. And bright eyes and the bloom of beauty play no small part in it too, as if these would never fade. He possessed a gift, not altogether to be coveted, who amid the pomp and ceremony of courtly halls and brilliant reception rooms, his vision not dazzled or intercepted by the blaze of jewels and costly trappings with which wealth and fashion clothe their votaries, could see only poor humanity caper and posture in abject nakedness, perhaps deformity; but if I look on a form even of female loveliness, am apt to see the voluptuous flesh peel off, and the bright eyes sink from view, and only a grinning skeleton look out at me. Faugh, the beauty of it—the virtue of it! But let those who will love and marry, or follow some other Will-o'-the-Wisp of happiness. They may possibly find some pleasure in life; and those who see the shortest way ahead will enjoy themselves the most. I had my dream like the rest, but awoke sooner. I, too, believed in woman's truth as I believe in nothing else, and had a glimpse of happiness. I found the one rotten, cankered, foul, and wormeaten; the other a painted lie. One can enter into the feelings of those who, tired of it all, seek for death as for a great treasure,

who 'rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they can find the grave,' and so end the poor play. I may be wronging the world, though ever so little, and truth and honesty may have gained a footing in it after all; but I have found it mainly made up of shams."

Miss Elwood and Ashwin passed on, unconscious of the thoughts which their presence had given rise to in Morton's mind.

"Have you seen anything of your neighbour, Mr. Morton, yet?" asked Ashwin.

"No," Miss Elwood answered; "but my father met him once or twice over some matters connected with the farm. He says he seems kind and anxious to oblige, as, indeed, everyone is with whom we have come in contact—out of pity, I suppose, for our inexperience and ignorance."

"Oh, Morton is not a bad fellow," Ashwin replied. "I have heard of one or two generous actions he did, which he thinks are not known. A bit rough and biting with his tongue sometimes, and he affects a great distrust of mankind—and of womankind in particular; so that any young lady who could overcome that sense of distrust, and bring him to what I might call his proper feelings, would make herself famous. I am sure the task would be a very easy one for you, Miss Elwood. What do you say to trying it? He has only to look into your face to read truth and constancy there; that is, if he is not wholly blind;" and then he added in a low voice: "He would be a happy man who could read love for himself there also."

"You must not say such things," she answered; "you must not pay silly compliments, Mr. Ashwin. I really thought you had too much good sense to do that. Besides, you know, it wouldn't be right in me to attempt to captivate Mr. Morton, even if he were ever so susceptible. I have made up my mind long ago to lead a single life, and nothing could change my resolution, not even the many excellent qualities and qualifica-

tions which Mr. Morton would no doubt possess as a husband. "Good-bye!" she added, for they had reached the gate leading to her house. Ted had already opened it, and was waiting for them.

"Good-bye!" he answered, taking her proffered hand and looking into her eyes. On her face a faint blush, called up by the words which she had just spoken, was dying away. "Good-bye!" he said; "and you must not accuse me of paying empty compliments, for I spoke in all sincerity and sober earnestness.—Good-bye, Ted!"

"Back again, dear!" said her father, as she reached the house; "I am always anxious when you are out of my sight, and glad when I see you returning. Over-anxious, I suppose, and foolishly apprehensive lest some accident might happen to you; for what would I do if any ill befel you—or Edwin? Life would then be dismal indeed."

She kissed him tenderly, and told him there was no cause for alarm, "for I am now quite a skilful horsewoman," she said; "and then I have Ted to take care of me, you know."

"I see Mr. Ashwin rode home with you to-day," her father said.

"As long as she rides Bob," broke in the boy, "there's not much fear—if anything went wrong he would only stop dead, and be glad of the chance. Mr. Ashwin rode home with us, and, I am sure, would have liked to come in, but Maud never asked him. He is always doing something for us, I am sure, and I think a lot of him," he added as he led the horses away.

"Yes," said Mr. Elwood to his daughter as they entered the house, "the young man has indeed been very kind and useful to me in many ways in my ignorance of farming; and I must consult him about these new sheep-yards that people tell me I should put up before shearing. But," he added sadly, "on this evening we are better alone."

"I know it, father," his daughter answered; "though I had almost hoped that in the distractions which our new life here

affords, the day might have passed over without bringing to your remembrance what anniversary it is. We must try to efface as much as we can the old and bitter memories of the past."

"I should, indeed, be glad for your sake, my child, if this could be done ; and I would give what little of life may remain for me if the recollections of the cruel past could be blotted out from your mind, and only the bright and tender impressions left. As for me, the record has been burnt in too deeply to be effaced, though smoothed and softened by time, and by the loving devotion of her who has gone from us, and of you, my daughter. Edwin, too young as yet to fully comprehend, has been kept from the knowledge of these things, and it is better, perhaps, that he should remain in ignorance for a little longer. Your love and care, Maud, has taken the place of that of her whom we have lost, whose devoted self-sacrifice was the means, under God, of preventing me from breaking down altogether—from losing every trace of self-respect, every vestige and ray of hope, every remnant of faith in God or man. Do you know you are very like your mother, Maud? I seem to see a greater resemblance every day, and, God knows, I love you, if possible, all the more for it."

"Father," she said, kissing him, the tears which she strove to check springing to her eyes, "I will try to be worthy of her, and will do all I can to make your days brighter and happier. Our life here, with its new duties and fresh surroundings, will, I am sure, help to make you forget the bitterness of the past, and may, perhaps, make some amends for it. But, even as it is, there are many sweet and loving memories enshrined which we can always recall with reverent thankfulness."

"True, my dear," the old man replied ; "these years have not all been dark or a waste, but have been brightened and redeemed by a love and devotion that has rarely or never been equalled. Were it not that the present, for you especially, my child, is, and must continue to be, blighted in some degree by the shadow .

of the past, I could look back upon it now without distress."

"You must not distress yourself on my account, father," his daughter answered ; "for, indeed, that would be very foolish and without cause. I am quite happy and contented in this new home of ours here, which, I believe, we shall all come to like very much, and can wish for nothing further, satisfied in being useful to you and Ted, and in knowing that you love me."

"Always true and loyal and forgetful of self, you are your mother's very spirit returned to me," the old man said, with feeling.

Ted now came in, and his sister went about her household duties ; for though she had a young girl from the neighbouring township to assist her, yet all the cares of the household and a great deal of lighter work devolved upon her. Since their arrival here she had also undertaken the education of her brother, who was advanced for his years and quick at learning, though, it must be admitted, not always a very diligent student, preferring at most times to help with any work going on upon the farm, or to ride into Bloomsbury on every possible occasion, rather than pursue his studies.

Mr. Elwood himself, old beyond his years, was not able to do much manual labour on the farm, but busied himself in the garden and orchard and in occasionally looking round the stock, and was beginning to take a great interest in farm life, with which he had evidently but little previous acquaintance. He kept a hired man, it is true, but he was not to be relied on in all things ; and Frank Ashwin's experience in all matters connected with stock was therefore found of great service, and was gladly availed of ; and that young man continued to visit at the farm and give both advice and assistance.

He spent an evening or two there, and on the first of these, subsequent to the occasion already mentioned, of his ride home from the township with Miss Elwood, she, at her father's

request, played and sang a song or two—plaintive old melodies they were, with much deep feeling in them. Ashwin found himself looking forward to these meetings with Miss Elwood with increasing pleasure, and was apt, indeed, after a time, to deceive himself into framing plausible excuses for bringing them about. He was, in fact, fast falling into that distracting state of bliss or misery called love—launching, or already launched, on the perilous deep, there

Tossed on a sea of doubts and fears,
Love's hapless mariner to sail.

But any, even the remotest attempt at love making, a tender word or look on his part, met with no response, save by a shrinking into a greater reserve, or by a look in averted eyes, which spoke perhaps of pain rather than displeasure.

His people at home heard of his doings by some means, and, as is generally the case, in an exaggerated form, and on his next visit to Harefield he was unmercifully quizzed by his sisters. Laura, the elder of the two who were grown up, a tall, dashing girl, and a clever horsewoman, who could take a fence as well as any of her brothers, was particularly severe on him.

“ Well, Frank,” she said, “ I did think better of you than that—making up to these people that no one knows anything about, all because the girl has got a pretty face—some designing creature, I suppose, who is trying to entrap you. Poor, soft-hearted Frank ! ”

“ Rattle away,” replied Frank, “ you can make as much game of me as you like, but don’t say anything against Miss Elwood, whom you haven’t even seen. What busy-body has been filling your silly heads with all this nonsense ? A fellow can’t do a neighbour a kindness without being taxed with falling in love with the neighbour’s daughter, if he happens to have one. You girls must be thinking of nothing but love and love making. You’ll find Miss Elwood is of a different stamp, if ever you should have the privilege of knowing her.”

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Laura, "that is a privilege that I shall be in no hurry to avail myself of. You remember, mother," she went on, appealing to Mrs. Ashwin, who sat placidly knitting, and smiling at all this, "you remember how Frank, when we were going up to his place lately, wanted us to call and see these people, and after we got there made some excuse about their not being quite settled in their new home? I suppose, really, he was ashamed on second thought to let us see this lady love of his. I am sure I shall want to know more about them before I call, though probably the more I should know about them, the less likely would I be to make their acquaintance. But it will be some time before I ride in that direction again, at any rate."

"You can trust Frank not to do anything to disgrace you, girls," said his mother; "besides, he has no intention of taking a wife, I know, for a long time yet. Don't be annoyed at what they say, Frank."

"Oh, I don't mind their chatter in the least," Frank replied. "I am not going to ask anyone to marry me just yet. The wharé would hardly be the place to take a wife to," he added, laughing. "Besides," he continued, "if I asked Miss Elwood, I don't think she would have me. She is not like some girls I know, who are always setting their caps at some one. It would be a good thing if there were more like her."

"It is easy to see he is badly struck," his sister said; "over head and ears already—love at first sight—mutual attachment, no doubt—ha, ha, ha!—very romantic, I am sure. Well, all I hope is that he won't do anything dreadful in his present infatuated state of mind. He has been warned at any rate." And Miss Ashwin left, satisfied at having done her duty, and in having the last word.

It is doubtful if all this had the effect intended. A little ridicule is very potent sometimes, but the disparaging allusions to Miss Elwood which his sister had indulged in, and which he knew to be wholly unmerited, causing a feeling of resent-

ment in Ashwin's mind on her behalf, an inclination to protect her from every aspersion, however slight ; and the consequence was the young girl was more in his thoughts than ever.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE Elwoods saw little of their neighbour Morton. He seldom visited anywhere except where business led him, and that was but rarely from home.

He had tried life under many different conditions, for his means were ample. Travel he had found wearisome, with mankind very much the same wherever he went. "Selfish, grasping, greedy," he said; "of many different coloured skins, but all very much alike underneath them."

Life in the cities of the Colonies he had soon tired of. "There is pretence everywhere," he would say; "but it is more glaringly apparent in the towns than in the country. Their houses are mostly built for show, their shops are a snare, and the wares in them not what they are represented to be. Their politicians are generally unmitigated shams, pandering in turn to every selfish cry of the hour; their parsons, or most of them, are shams, preaching in a make-believe way against sin, but, Brahmin-like, for fear of defilement, gathering their robes of sham righteousness about them, and turning their back on sinners. Their religions—from the Roman's and his next door neighbour and near relation, the Anglican High Churchman's, with their misleading symbolisms, with their pomp and ritual and apostolic assumptions, begotten of human vanity, down to the Salvationist's, perhaps the most genuinely sincere of any, with his wild, uncouth fanfaronade of worship—are chiefly made up of pretence. Mammon is the god of the cities; and the wealth they worship, or the appear-

ance of it, is often unreal. Unreality leavens nearly everything there except poverty, degradation and crime, which are all too real."

To this new settlement in the bush, where he hoped to find mankind dwelling in a more primitive state, and living in greater simplicity of life, he had come ; but, even here, he had discovered, or thought he had discovered, though in a less marked degree, the shams and unrealities which he had been seeking to escape from.

"To aching eyes each landscape lowers" ; and the warped and biased mind cannot take in with clear and comprehensive vision both the good and ill, both the lights and shadows of life.

Morton, however, about the time at which this tale has now arrived, did pay a visit to Elwood's place, but going no farther than the sheep-yards. It had been found necessary to bring in the dry sheep, the hoggets and wethers, and in doing this Frank Ashwin and his dogs had helped, or, rather, had done nearly all the work, for Mr. Elwood's man and his dog were very often at such times in the habit of working at cross purposes ; and mustering amongst the logs is at best a difficult operation at any time.

It was expected that a few of Morton's sheep might have got through the dividing fence since the last muster, and notice had been given him so that he could claim and take away any of his that might have found their way in. His man, who acted as shepherd among other duties, and generally took charge of work of this kind, happened to be away, and Morton himself went over in the afternoon. He had met Mr. Elwood before, and Ashwin he had known for some time, and had, indeed, formed a closer intimacy with him lately than his reserved nature was in the habit of doing.

The yards were small and inconvenient, and of a temporary character, and the work of drafting was difficult. Two or three of his sheep, however, had been already caught and put

in a pen by themselves when he arrived. The boy, Ted, was busy helping in his way, and taking a keen interest in ear-marks and brands.

"I know your ear-mark, Mr. Morton," he said—"two punch holes and a back bit;" and then immediately afterwards he exclaimed: "I see another of your sheep, I think. Yes, there he goes," and darting in among the mob the boy succeeded, after some trouble, in catching a sheep by the leg; but it was rather too strong for him, and was dragging him about the yard when Morton went to his assistance, and found the sheep was really one of his.

"A smart boy, Mr. Elwood," Morton remarked. "He has got a quick eye in his head, and knows how to catch a sheep, too."

"Yes," replied his father, "he is a smart boy in some things; and I suppose will soon learn more about sheep than I shall be ever able to know. A good boy, too, in general; but, like most Colonial lads, rather too self-assertive. They think they know everything, and like to give their opinions on every subject—too cheeky, in fact, and requiring to be kept well under by a firm hand."

"Cheek, my dear sir," replied Morton in his caustic way; "cheek should be developed by every means. If you want success in life you must have cheek. All the virtues are as nothing compared with it. Your modest merit will stay in the background and hang its head there; while cheek, the brazen, though wanting in worth, and barren in brains, will step past it into the front rank, and make itself at home there. Give me assurance without merit, rather than merit without assurance; and if a man has any talent in him, it wants cheek to crown the edifice of success. Don't disparage cheek, Mr. Elwood. If I were a family man, and had boys, and wished them to get on in the world, and if I believed in the efficacy of prayer, I would put up my earnest petitions daily that the Giver of all things would in an especial manner highly endow them with cheek."

"Ah, Mr. Morton, I cannot agree with you in all you say," Mr. Elwood answered. "Assurance and self-assertion may be aids to worldly advancement, and no doubt often are; but then, it does not follow that we should wish to see these traits in our children take the place of worthier qualities of heart and mind. There are nobler aspirations than after worldly prosperity—it is not everything in life that we should desire it above measure."

"It is, nevertheless, the goal for which most people *seem* to be striving, the prize towards the attainment of which they *appear* to be directing their best energies," replied Morton. "They may, perhaps, have some high, holy, and heavenly motives for seeking wealth and worldly advantage, but I, for one, don't give them credit for them. I may be as bad as the others, but with this difference: I, at best, can see no goal worth striving for; no prize worth the winning; and a man may as well, I suppose, follow this hollow deception as any other."

"I do not hold with you at all there, either," replied the old man, with some warmth. "Believe me, sir, life, even this life, has objects worth striving for; love and truth, and mutual faith and fellowship, and kindly purpose towards others—and, in spite of your bitter words, I will not for a moment think, Mr. Morton, that you are a stranger to all of these. I have suffered from wrong and falsehood as much, perhaps, as anyone, but I have found also truth and constancy and self-denying affection, and these have compensated for much that I have lost; and then we can strive for and hope to attain to a life where falsehood is unknown and wrong is not."

"I envy you your trust," said Morton, "for one is better to have something of the sort, even if there is not much to build it on, than to have none at all."

Their conversation was here interrupted by the appearance of Miss Elwood and the hired girl, who came out to the yards with some tea and cake for those at work with the sheep. Mr.

Elwood introduced his daughter to Morton, who in a pleasant enough way, entered into conversation with her for a moment or two, making some commonplace remarks about the weather and the roads, etc., looking at her with his keen glance from time to time.

She went back to the house almost immediately; and shortly afterwards Morton left, saying that he would send his man round for the sheep that evening, or early on the following morning.

“A fair face,” he soliloquised, as he rode homeward. “A fair face, with some appearance of truth in it; and honest eyes if one could put faith in woman’s looks, or believe that they afford any index to the heart. The polished surface of the gem, they may be, but I doubt it; paste, counterfeit, tinted glass, more likely. And the old man—older in body than in years, perhaps—has evidently seen sorrow, but has found, so he thinks, some consolation in life—well, I am glad of it—and looks forward to something better hereafter: rest for the wearied spirit. Rest should be welcome, if it would bring forgetfulness with it. But the soul may swelter in its own everlasting unrest and oblivion be not found. We shall some day, perhaps, fathom the mystery, if there is a bottom to it; solve the problem, if it is capable of solution; find some utility in it all; or die like a dog and know no more about it. Meanwhile they are happiest who cannot see into the hollow heart of things, who can love and trust and play the fool generally without finding out the folly of it. And yet that girl’s eyes had an honest look in them, and someone may find love and truth there. Pah! I am a fool myself for thinking so; there is truth in nothing.”

CHAPTER XIV.

FLASH HARRY and his mates had been working hard all day, and the sun was now getting low. They expected to finish in two or three weeks the contract which they had taken from Ashwin, and were anxious to get through with it. There were four of them in the party, and they had been bushfalling together all the season. Harry and one of the others, known as Big George, had been chosen mates for many years ; but the other two had only been taken into partnership in the contracts entered into during the present season. They were all looked upon as decent fellows, who could be relied on to carry out their work faithfully.

Harry had just given the last cut of the axe to a big rimu, which, after a few premonitory cracks as it began to move, fell, driving before it in its line of fall a dozen or so of the smaller trees, which had been "scarfed" or cut partly through in readiness, and skilfully, so that each, when struck, might again in its turn strike and bring down another. The noise of a fall or drive of this kind is like thunder—loud, prolonged, reverberating.

"Don't forget it's your turn to go for the butter to-night, Harry," Big George called out. "This is churning day, and we're about out ; but don't stay too long talking to the good-looking girl down there—her that gave me the butter last time—or you won't be back in time for tea. I know your weakness when there's a pretty face about, and I expect I had better go again myself."

"No you don't, my boy," replied Harry; "I have no doubt you would like to go again. I have noticed you haven't been quite yourself since your last visit down there—lackadaisical-like and absent-minded, dreamy, unsociable, too—and off your tucker a bit, I believe."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the other: "no fear of that, Harry; the sight of a pretty girl is not going to knock me over like that—not but it might make a fellow feel as if he would like to give up roving and settle down. If I had a couple of hundred acres of good bush land, and a wife like what that girl down there would make, I wouldn't call the Queen my aunt; and, by Jove! I mean to have a buck at some of those sections in the Whakatangi Block that'll be thrown open shortly, and I would advise you to do the same."

"Talk of the power of lovely woman after that," said Harry. "She has sent a good many men to the devil before now; but here we have the mere sight of her virgin charms transforming my mate, Big George—who was always an honest sort of chap, but a bit of a rambler—into a prospective, douce, staid, stay-at-home-of-an-evening-and-nurse-the-baby cockatoo of the future. But the difficulty with you, George," Harry went on, laughing, "will be in making the proposal, for though you can talk about women right enough when you're not in their company, you're as bashful as a young girl herself—a deal more so than many of them—when you get alongside of one. Well, I must see this charmer of yours, if only for once; and I may be able to put in a good word for you. I'll promise you, though, that I won't enter for the marriage stakes against you; and, after this, you can go for the butter as long as we are here."

"Be off with you, now," replied George, good-humouredly, "The girl wouldn't have anything to say to either of us; and it isn't only this last week or two that I've been thinking seriously about anchoring myself to a bit of ground, as you know."

Harry struck his axe in a stump, and made his way to the

camp for something to carry the butter in. Here he washed and tidied himself a little, for he was particular about his personal appearance ; and it was for this reason, coupled with his smart style generally, that he had been given the sobriquet of "Flash." But, indeed, nicknames are often given among men of his class without any particular reason, or any very obvious characteristic to account for them. Harry certainly dressed in somewhat better style when away from work (or when at it, too, for the matter of that) than his mates, or men in like position generally did. He was free with his money, too ; and, in taking his pleasure, while many of his class were in the habit of knocking down their cheques at the nearest public-house, he, on the contrary, when he could afford a holiday, would generally pay one of the cities a visit, put up at a good hotel, and enjoy himself in a less debasing way. He had knocked about the Colonies a good deal ; a "rolling stone" he had been ; and had tried his luck for a time on the gold-fields of the West Coast, where he had picked up Big George for a mate.

Fortune, however, had not favoured them there ; and about two or three years since they had, together, sought the bush districts of the North Island. They employed themselves here exclusively at contract work, bushfalling and fencing, sometimes by themselves, at other times taking a mate or two in with them, or engaging a man or two on wages.

Harry on this evening followed the track leading through the bush out to Robinson's clearing ; and once there, with the house below, about half a mile away, struck across the paddocks towards it.

Billy and his younger sister were playing outside as he drew near.

"Well, my young shaver, and what's your name?" asked Harry.

"William Robinson ; but they call me Billy, mostly," replied the boy. "I know who you are—you're one of the

bushfalling chaps that get butter here—but I don't think *you* have been here for it before."

"Oh, Robinson, is it?" Harry said. "Aye, to be sure, now I remember, that was the name. And this is your little sister, I suppose? Well, she is a nice little nugget, anyhow; and here's a sixpence to buy lollies for her and you."

It was Mary who came to the door in answer to his knock. "By Jove, George was right," thought Harry. "She's a regular clipper, and no mistake; and enough to make any sober-minded chap like George begin to think seriously about matrimony."

"Mother," Mary called out, when Harry had stated his errand, "here is someone come for the bushmen's butter—I suppose it is all ready."

"Yes, my dear; but I'll get it, myself, from the dairy," replied Mrs. Robinson, coming out of an inner room; but catching sight of Harry as he stood at the door in the as yet clear light of evening, which had begun, however, to fail within doors, she stopped, and looked at him eagerly, laying hold of the corner of the kitchen table as if for support.

"What might your name be?" she asked in a voice in which suppressed emotion might have been detected, and which, perhaps, had in consequence lost something of its natural tone.

"Well," replied Harry, an uneasy feeling coming over him, "I am commonly known among my mates as Harry only. We are apt to drop the surname, and almost forget it, I believe, sometimes; and pick up with a nickname, perhaps, instead."

"Yes, but tell me what it is—what your real name is," asked Mrs. Robinson, with a quivering voice.

"Well, I believe it happens to be the same as your own," Harry answered,—"a pretty common one—Robinson, Harry Robinson."

"And you ran away from home to sea in *The Three Kings* to Melbourne, twelve years ago?" Mrs. Robinson cried, with

increasing emotion, and coming forward a step or two ; while Mary said, restrainingly :

“ Mother, mother, it may not be him.”

But over Harry’s face there had come a conscious look that in some unmistakeable way recalled to it, bearded and changed though it was, the boyish expression of long ago. Mrs. Robinson saw it, and all her doubts vanished.

“ You’re my own boy—you’re my own boy,” she cried, throwing her arms round his neck, and weeping tears of joy, her head upon his breast.

“ Why, mother, poor old mother,” said Harry, kissing her, “ who would have expected to find you here ? I thought you were still in the Old Country.”

Her husband, coming at this particular moment with one of the boys through a gate out of the paddock at the back of the house, caught a glimpse of what was going on, and exclaimed : “ It’s my belief your mother’s at it again ; and,” after a second look, “ she’s either got the boy himself this time, or else somebody’s playing a fine game on us, and no mistake—some impostor as likely as not, that, maybe, that Scotchman has sent here.”

“ Here’s father,” said Mary.

“ Oh, John,” said Mrs. Robinson, “ our boy has come at last—to our own door, too. Look at him, John, look at him !”

“ Eh ? what !” said John, looking into the smiling, honest face of Harry, “ it’s my belief you *have* got him this time. You’re welcome, my boy,” holding out his hand ; “ if so be you are our boy ; and there’s no mistake about it, now I have had a better look at you—but what a big, strong chap, to be sure.”

“ Why, father,” replied Harry, shaking hands warmly, “ I ought to have known you anywhere—you’re not a bit changed. It’s a wonder I didn’t drop across you somewhere since I came into the neighbourhood ; but I never dreamt of you being in New Zealand.”

"Oh, Harry, why didn't you write again?" asked his mother.

"Still kept putting it off, mother, till I had something good to write about, and that time never quite came round. It was thoughtless, and too bad of me, I know," her son said. "And this is Mary, I suppose," continued he, kissing her, "that I left a little girl, just going to school; and Bessie, too, who hadn't started to go; and where is Annie, who was next to me; and Tom, and Hugh, who was a two-year-old or so when I left?"

"All here, and one or two more besides," said his father—"except Annie, who was married just before we left the old country, and Tom, who is working on his own hook now, but not far from here."

Thus Harry renewed his acquaintance with the members of his family. His mother's face beamed with truest happiness, watching him with a gaze that seemed as if it never would be satisfied. Mary, too, felt a pride in her big, handsome brother; and the younger members, shy at first, soon made themselves at home with him. Billy and the little sister could claim a previous acquaintance, and showed the sixpence he had given them before he knew how near a relation he was.

He stayed for two or three hours, and heard of their struggles in making their new home in New Zealand; of their anxiety regarding him, and of the efforts made to find him.

When he rose to go, the knowledge that she must part with him again, even for a short time, came like a shock to his mother, and she said :

"You must come and make your home here, Henry, now that we have found you."

Robinson backed up his wife's request. "You'll always find a welcome here, my boy." But Harry would not hear of doing so.

"I couldn't think of it," he said; "you have plenty of olive branches here without me; besides, I have roamed about too long to settle down quietly now, I am afraid. Perhaps I

may look out for a bit of bush-land near you some day, and turn cockatoo—marry and settle down in earnest, eh, mother? But you'll see plenty of me while I'm in the neighbourhood. If I'm within a day's journey I can always ride over on a Sunday and see you; and if I should go a little farther away, I'll let you hear from me regularly. No fear of me not writing to you now, mother. You'll always know of my whereabouts now, I promise you that. But, by Jove!" he went on, "I must be off, or we'll be having Big George coming to look for me. He'll think I'm lost in the bush, or else making love to the pretty girl he told me lived down here; eh, Mary, ha, ha, ha!" And Harry laughed to think of the fun he would have with Big George, and how he could tell him that he had the first kiss.

He took his leave, promising to come back and spend the whole day long on Sunday, which was only two days off. He came on that day early, but had been to the township the evening before, and arrived loaded with presents—picture and story books and lollies for Billy and the little sister Ruth; a stock whip for Hugh; a brooch each for Mary and Bessie; for his father, who, he saw, enjoyed his smoke of an evening, a silver-mounted pipe; and for his mother—nothing. "But you and I, mother," he said, "will go down to the township some afternoon, and see if we can get something worth buying—a new sewing machine, eh, or something really good? Oh! I can tell you, I'm quite a rich fellow, believe me."

"I want nothing but yourself, dear," she said; "that is quite enough for me. Thankful I am, and overjoyed, in having you near me again."

He came again one evening during the week, and in the afternoon on the following Sunday.

CHAPTER XV.

BIG GEORGE, after some persuasion, was prevailed upon by Harry to accompany him on the latter occasion, above referred to, and was made very welcome, as having been Harry's faithful mate and bosom friend for years; but he appeared bashful and ill at ease. Either he found the influence of Mary's bright eyes too over-powering, or, in addition to this, having been away from woman's society for a long time, he could not make himself at home in it.

George had been in the colony now for seven or eight years, but was still the same good-natured, easy-going fellow as he was when he first landed—soft-hearted, and with an innate modesty that had never left him.

Harry's more expensive tastes and pleasures generally left him with a rather bare exchequer, while Big George, of a more frugal turn of mind, though by no means parsimonious, was supposed to have a nice little sum in the savings bank.

Maurice M'Keown had found his way to Robinson's on that day also. Mary and her second youngest brother had walked into church on that morning, and by some fortuitous coincidence Maurice also had gone there, and had walked home with them.

He had heard with surprise that Harry, whose acquaintance he had made some months ago, and in whose camp he had spent an evening or two, had turned out to be Mrs. Robinson's long lost son, and Mary's brother.

Big George, after they had met on this Sunday, could

not but notice that between Mary and M'Keown some degree of intimacy existed, a friendship which, at least on the part of the latter, was more than Platonic, for he was evidently "sweet upon her": while Maurice, in the shy, soft looks which the other stole at Mary, and in his embarrassed manner, which was foreign to him in his life in camp, thought he saw suspicious symptoms of what might develop into dangerous rivalry; for George was a good-looking fellow withal, and the particular friend and chum of the regained brother; and Maurice said to himself, with all a lover's fears upon him, "There's no telling what sort of a chap will take a girl's fancy, and you can't be sure of her till you put the wedding-ring on her finger." Morton would have added, "And you can't be sure of her then."

"Another victim, Mary," Maurice said to her, enquiringly, as they were returning from a walk which they had all taken over the farm, during which Robinson had pointed out with pride its various excellencies of soil, of water, and of pasture; had drawn attention to the good qualities of his breed of milkers and their progeny, and to the satisfactory lambing in his small flock of sheep. Maurice, on returning, had managed to drop behind with Mary.

"Another victim, Mary," he said. "How many does that make, I wonder? It's a pity some sweet and lovely things should be so deadly in their effects on us. But you can't help it, I suppose, and that relieves you of responsibility."

"Whatever are you talking about?" asked Mary, looking up at him with a smile.

"Why, Big George, of course," answered Maurice. "Can't anyone see that he's knocked over already. I know the symptoms—love's languishing looks—the soft, adoring glances when he thinks no one is taking notice, the pleased bashfulness when the girl speaks to him or shows him any little favour."

Mary laughed a merry laugh, and said, "If these are the

symptoms, Maurice, I don't think you have ever shown them. You could never have been in love, I am sure. I have never seen anything like bashfulness with you, at any rate."

"We don't all take it in the same way," he answered. "Oh! Mary—Mary, I am bold and bashful, hopeful and down-hearted, confident and full of fears, generous and selfish, and made up of fifty other contradictions; and if you could mould a man round every division of me, we would all be in love with you. My bashfulness would throw sheep's eyes at you from a distance, while my bolder self would kiss you on the lips; my jealousy would build you round with stone walls, while my pride of you would like all the world to look at you. When all these are rolled into one individual, and he offers himself to you, don't you think, sweet Mary, he ought to be rewarded."

"Well, perhaps he ought," Mary answered, coyly. "But, then, we don't always get what we deserve. I should advise him not to die of despair, however; but I don't think he is likely to do that in any case. But here's Billy waiting for us."

Billy was seated astride of a log, and they had not observed him till they were close upon him.

"Billy," said Maurice, "there is a place for boys, and a place where boys ought not to be."

"I know where that is," answered Billy: "father says boys oughtn't to be in bed after six o'clock in the morning."

"There's many another place where they're best away from," Maurice said. "Why don't you stay with your big brother?"

"Oh, I have been with him all the afternoon," answered the boy, "and I thought Mary mightn't be pleased if I didn't walk with her a bit. I think I like her best, after all."

"You and I agree there, at any rate, Billy, my boy," said Maurice; "constancy is a virtue, and I suppose I must forgive you for turning up when you're not wanted, as you generally

do. I was talking to your sister here about the transmogrification of things metaphysical when you interrupted us and broke the thread of my discourse, and when once the thread is broken, Billy, it's ten to one if you can pick up the ends of it again."

"You wanted to kiss her, like you did in the dairy," said the boy.

"What a deep, knowing, mind-reading young rascal you are, to be sure, Billy," said Maurice, laughing, while Mary blushed, and proceeded to join the others.

Harry came once again to his father's place before the contract for Ashwin's bushfalling was finished, but, poor fellow, he was carried there on that occasion.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE contract was nearing completion. Another day would finish it, and the men were anxious to get through with the work, for the mosquitoes were beginning to make their appearance in the bush, and Harry and his mates had yet another small contract to carry out at a place a few miles distant. The axes had been ringing out cheerily from early morning, and the "falls" had been frequent and far-sounding.

Harry had planned a big drive with a combined rimu and rata which towered above its fellows of the forest ; had "scarfed" all the smaller trees in front of it down to the edge of the already felled bush, and expected, when it was brought down, that it would send to earth the whole of these, driving one upon another far beyond the reach of its own length, with that continued, prolonged crash which bushmen love to hear. But they did not all go down. A pukatea had either not been cut deeply enough, or the tree, with which it should have been struck had fallen outside of it. A tawa, however, drawn over by the tangled vines and supplejacks that interlaced the tree-tops in all directions, had fallen transversely upon the still standing pukatea. Here it lodged, and in its turn supported another which had been dragged over upon it from a nearly opposite direction. Thus, the three trees still stood, the two tawas resting on the pukatea at different angles, and yet in a measure upholding it, while all around had been brought to earth. This is one of the most awkward mischances to be found in the work of bush-

falling, and one that is attended with much danger to anyone attempting to remedy it by giving a few well-directed strokes of the axe at the point of least resistance, and so bringing the trees down ; for the ground round about is strewn with a tangled mass of fallen timber, making it difficult for the axeman to get clear away when the mass begins to move ; and it is often uncertain in which direction it may come down, or what antics one or other of the lodged and leaning trees may be up to, on its own account, when the whole sways to the fall.

“ Well, I’ll be jiggered ! ” said Harry, as he looked disconsolately at the unsightly clump still standing.

“ Hallo ! ” cried Big George, who was working near ; “ hallo, Harry, my experienced bushwhacker, you didn’t carry all before you this time.”

“ No ; but I’ll soon put it to rights,” replied Harry.

“ Leave it—leave it, Harry,” returned George ; “ the first gale of wind will bring them down, in any case. It isn’t safe.”

“ I’ll be cautious, old man,” Harry answered. “ It’ll never do to have people saying we left some of the bush standing when we came away from the job.”

“ Let them stand, Harry,” urged George, as he saw Harry preparing to go in. “ Leave them as they are. I tell you it’s not safe ; that pukatea will snap like a carrot, without warning, and some of them may come down on you before you know where you are.”

But Harry was not to be persuaded. “ Don’t you be frightened, old man,” he said, and threaded his way in amongst the fallen timber, singing as he went :

“ Let elodhoppers plough, then, and harrow,
Let larrikins loiter at flax,
Let the navvy ply shovel and barrow,
But give me the swing of the axe.”

It needed a good many blows of the axe, given with judgment on the main support, propped up as it was in some degree

by its companions, before any movement was perceptible ; but when the movement did take place, it came suddenly. At the first warning, Harry ran, with the axe in his hand, in the direction that offered the greatest safety ; but he had gone only a few yards when his foot caught in a root or vine, and he fell headlong. Before he could gain his feet again, one of the tawas, glancing from its fellow and swerving round, was upon him, striking him heavily as he was in the act of rising. It was not a large tree, but it struck him with cruel force : and poor Harry lay under it, crushed and torn.

“ My God ! ” cried George, who had been anxiously watching, “ it has caught him ; ” and, calling loudly to the others, he struggled through the fallen branches, to the rescue of his mate. They relieved him with axes and with levers as fast as hands, most willing, could. The tree had struck him across the shoulder and chest, and there was a rough wound or tear in his side, caused by a jagged root or stump against which he had been forced. But he was not killed, nor yet unconscious.

“ It’s all up, George,” he struggled with difficulty to say : “ you always gave me good advice—but I wouldn’t take it.”

One of them ran off to Ashwin’s for help, returning in a little time with M’Keown ; while Ashwin himself galloped off for the doctor. The others had prepared a stretcher, and tenderly, very tenderly, their rough hands laid Harry on it, and prepared to carry him out of the bush.

“ Yonder,” he muttered.—“ Home.”

They did not know but his mind might be wandering, but they took the words as an indication that he wished to be taken to his mother’s house ; and gently and carefully they carried him there. The distance was not great.

Many a poor fellow, crushed and maimed in the bush, has been carried in like manner, with affectionate, unwearied care, over long leagues of country—over rough and steep hills, across deep ravines, and along tracks deep in mud, before a place

could be reached where a better means of conveyance was procurable.

It was a sad procession that led down to Robinson's. Someone had gone before to break the news ; and Mary and her sister cried bitterly when they saw their lately found brother borne so helplessly home. But his mother wept not. With a white face, she had clasped her hands together in mute agony when they told her of the accident ; but she went to meet her boy a little way from the house, and soothingly and hopefully spoke words of comfort ; and wiped his damp brow and also, alas ! the blood that stained his lips.

She had her own bed made ready for him, and when he was laid in it, she rarely left him, and only for a few minutes at a time. She it was who tended his every want, and seemed jealous of any other hand than her own doing anything for him.

The doctor came and examined Harry's injuries. Many ribs were broken, and the shoulder crushed, besides the wound in the side ; but he feared most for internal hurt, but could not determine as yet the extent of it. He did all that was possible, and promised to come again early on the following morning.

Harry rallied somewhat about that time, and talked a little to his mother, though she tried to prevent him exerting himself, for she knew that exertion, however little, might be hurtful.

"Poor old mother," he said feebly, "it is all for the best—I'd always have been a worry to you—and couldn't have settled down long anywhere."

"Hush, Henry ; hush, dear," she said deprecatingly. "You'll get strong and well again—I'll nurse you round to health again—not just perhaps so strong and well as you were ; but that won't matter—I can have you always near me then. Surely," she continued, yearningly, "surely, God would not take you away from me now, after bringing you back to me.

I prayed to Him night and day to give my boy back to me ; and He answered my prayer, and brought you home to me, to my very door ; but, oh ! surely not for me to lose you again like this."

Though she set her heart on his recovery, and would not permit the thought of the possibility of a fatal termination to settle upon her mind, but fought against it, yet it would ever and again for a moment force its dreadful presence upon her, and blanch her cheek and wring her heart.

She read to him out of the same old copy of the New Testament as he remembered her reading out of to him when a boy ; and in the words of pardon and comfort, reaching him through the loved and loving tones of her voice, his soul found penitence and peace.

His father, too, was much grieved in his way, and felt deeply for his suffering son, so cruelly struck down.

" It's my belief," he said sadly to Maurice M'Keown, who had come over again on the evening following the accident to learn how Harry was, " It's my belief there's not much chance of him pulling through. It's more than likely the life will leave him before many days, or hours maybe. But his mother, I can see, won't let herself believe it till it comes ; and then God knows how she'll keep up under it when the blow does fall."

Robinson's heart-felt sorrow for Harry was overshadowed by the great anxiety that possessed him regarding his wife, and the effect which the death of her dearly loved, long lost and lately-recovered son might have upon her.

His fears of a fatal termination were soon sadly fulfilled. During the night Harry took a turn for the worse and gradually sank, and died.

When all was over his mother sat dry-eyed and silent in the little sitting-room, with a fixed and vacant look, regardless of those about her.

" Mother, oh, mother," said Mary, kneeling beside her and

taking her hands, the tears meanwhile coursing down her own cheeks ; “don’t look like that, mother, darling—he is at rest and at peace now, with no more pain. Let me get you a cup of tea ; and then lie down, and perhaps you will sleep. You know you have not slept since they brought him home, but have watched by him all the time.”

“Go away, child ; go away and leave me,” her mother said, and then continued wildly : “Oh, Mary, there is no God—there is no God of mercy, and prayer is a delusion and a waste of breath.”

“Oh, mother, do not say such dreadful things and look like that,” said Mary, rising, in deep distress. “Look,” she continued, as she caught sight of a photograph of Harry, taken when he was a boy at school, and lifting it from the mantelpiece where it had always been given the place of honour, she put it into her mother’s hands. “Look,” she said, “at his likeness when he was a boy ; and think of all the love you lavished on him then and since, and of the joy and satisfaction it brought you, and how much better it is that he should have come back to you, though it was to die in your arms, than to have died among strangers, as he might have done, away from those who loved him.”

Her mother looked at the likeness of the bright-faced lad for a moment or two with softening eyes.

“My boy, my boy,” she cried—“my dead boy” ; and the fountains of her great grief were broken up, and the flood-gates of her affliction opened, and she wept long and piteously.

She was more resigned afterwards ; and when all was over, and they had buried him in the Bloomsbury cemetery, whither he was followed by a little band of sincere mourners—Big George cried like a child—she fell back into the usual routine of her life—cheerful withal, though the shadow of her heavy sorrow was visible to those who watched her with eyes of affection.

She felt she could bless God now for his goodness in bringing her son home to die.

To the swagger who called there was always a meal and a kind word, as before, though no anxious enquiries were put touching a missing Henry Robinson.

CHAPTER XVII.

IT has been said that Old Dan rarely visited the township. At long or irregular intervals he did, but it was always some object out of the common that took him there. Though he could take his whisky regularly and freely, and did so, he had, nevertheless, his periodically recurring seasons when he would get on "the burst," and soak himself in it, but he never lost his senses, or the suspicious wariness of his natural disposition, even at these times. The only change, if it could be called such, visible in him during these bouts was an increase of gloomy viciousness and a freer use of foul and blasphemous language on his part. He seemed to make it a rule, however, to keep at home on these occasions and confine himself to the wharé or the cave where the still was. O'Byrne took little notice of him at such times ; and Davie, since he had become a partner in the business, had thought it best on the one occasion in which Dan had "broken out," to give him a wide berth.

"The d——d auld rascal's bad enoo' at ordinar' times, but juist noo he's as spitefu' as a mountain cat, an' as dangerous as the deil himsel'!"

If Old Dan preferred to stay at home when in his cups, O'Byrne on the other hand liked to go abroad for his spree, and have it out at the *Cosmopolitan*, where, if he met with a few congenial spirits, things went fast and furious for a day or two. He was not a heavy drinker, though, and indulged more from a love of company and good fellowship than from a craving for

strong drink ; and, whether it was making love to the girls or carousing with his boon companions of the hour, he did all with light-hearted carelessness and rollicking good humour ; and if he joined in a row, and had to use his fists and give or take punishment, he bore no malice, but was always ready to shake hands over a friendly glass afterwards.

O'Byrne and Davie had gone down to the Cosmopolitan, taking the pack horse with them and the usual load—"mate an' moisture," as Dennis confidentially called it, leaving Old Dan at home. The next day passed, and the following one wore on till evening, and still they did not return, and Dan was getting angrily anxious.

"That b—— fool, Dinnis," he muttered to himself—"Omadhun that he is at toimes—is on the spree ag'in, an' 'e'll be afther lettin' somebody ilse into the saycret av the still, an', mebbe, bring the police down on us. It was himsilk that brought the snakin' Scotchman here, bad luck to his ugly face —*he'll* be close enough now, I'll be bound ; but I'll be d——d if I'll trust Dinnis down there any longer ! It's some girl, faith, mebbe, that he's coortin', an' if it's in tow av wan av them he is, the devil a thing he'll hide from them if they ax him. The saycret av his mother's shame wouldn't be safe wid him ;" and with another oath, Dan avowed his intention of proceeding to the township that night and "rootin' Dinnis out," or, at least, of keeping a strict watch over him.

Accordingly, just as the day was closing in, he started to walk there, his grim, hard face looking darker and more evil-disposed even than usual, as he stepped out stoutly in the dim and fading light, till he was swallowed up, as it were, in the gloomy shadows of the bush, which bordered and overhung the track for some distance from O'Byrne's clearing.

He reached the Cosmopolitan about nine o'clock, and as he entered the bar he could hear the not unmusical voice of Dennis singing "The Cruiskeen Lan" in the room across the passage. This apartment was designated, on door and

window-pane as the "Commercial Room," though what transactions in the way of commerce took place within it, other than in connection with the retail liquor trade, it might, perhaps, be difficult to discover. The room itself was furnished with a number of strong chairs, and with a couple of hard couches, greasy at the higher end of each from contact with the many heads that had reclined there. Oilcloth—a good deal the worse for wear—that covered the floor, a few prints on the walls, a table on which were a few papers of not very recent date, a spittoon or two which were not often made use of, and on the mantel-piece a couple of packs of well-fingered cards, completed the equipment of the room. Some strong wooden battens had been fastened across the lower sashes of the windows on the inside to protect the glass from injury through a helpless lurch or rough shove on the part of any of the occupants.

On this night O'Byrne and Davie were seated on either side of a log fire which blazed on the hearth, for the nights were still chilly, and in front of it and elsewhere about the room were five or six others. Westall was there, and so were two or three men who had been lately paid off from a road contract, and had been melting down their earnings here for the last day or two. The air was thick with tobacco smoke.

Davie, under the influence of a good many glasses, had become voluble, and had been regaling the company with some stories of the road, and had even treated it to a taste of his musical powers by singing the sundowner's song. Dennis had followed with "The Cruiskeen Lan."

"An' now, me boys," he said, as he finished the chorus, "we'll have another cruiskeen lawn. Call in me bould Jacob, an' name yer dhrinks, an', be the powers," he added, catching sight of Old Dan in the doorway, "if here isn't me respectable ould uncle—just in toime to join us. Come in, ye sintimintal ould saint, come in an' make a night av it. The divil a bit

I'll stir from here this night, if that's what yer aifter. The ould wharé must take care av itself, an' there's wan comfort, nobody's likely to stale much out av it, for, be the powers, there isn't much worth stalin' in it. That's wan av the blissin's av poverty, boys, ye can lave home wid a light heart whin ye lave no treasures behint ye. Isn't that true, Dan?"

"Faith an' it is," acquiesced Dan, "an', troth, it's little anybody would foind over beyant. To be sure," he added, "there's a pig or two runnin' on the grass, forbye a few ould ewes. Not but I'm thinkin' it's toime ye wor makin' a move from here. There's work to be done on the section this sayson yet, ye'll moind, or the Government 'll be aifter takin' it back from ye."

"Niver moind," replied Dennis, "it's married I'll be gettin' some av these days, an' thin I won't lave home wanst in a blue moon. Och, Molly, make haste to me heart. Toss aff yer dhrinks, boys, an' now I'm in the humour I'll sing yez another song. It's in praise av whisky that the last was, but this'll be in the praise av what's fifty toimes betther—that's wimmen." And Dennis proceeded forthwith to sing :

There are lots of fine girls in New Zealand—

My blessin's on one and on all—

Who will reach you a purty and free hand

And say, "How do you do?" when you call.

There are eyes that are brown as the berry,

And more that are blue as the sky,

And some that are shy and some merry,

But, Molly, it's yours that supply

The light I must live in or die—

O, Molly, make haste to my heart.

And wealth brings its burden of trouble,

And sorrow will sit by us all,

And they tell me that fame is a bubble

Will break with the slightest downfall.

Then let others court favours from Fortune,

I still the old jade can defy,

For when I've a mind to go courtin',
O, Molly, it's to you that I fly,
Content in your favours to lie—
O, Molly, make haste to my heart.

Old Dan saw that there was no chance of Dennis leaving before morning, and concluded to make the best of the occasion in his own way. He was, therefore, before long ensconced near the fire with his pipe in full blast ; and though he rarely joined in the conversation except when he thought O'Byrne or Davie was touching on dangerous ground, he yet did not fail to take a moderate whisky with the others when any of the company “ shouted.”

Dennis, however, was not likely to divulge the secret which Old Dan was so careful to guard, or say anything to arouse suspicion, for though on the spree he never on such occasions got helplessly drunk, or failed to have his wits about him ; while Davie at all times, when it suited his purpose, was as close as an oyster.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE sun on the following forenoon was shining with returning warmth ; a soft wind was blowing lightly from the west, and the grass everywhere was showing the deep green of fresh and vigorous growth. The spirit of Spring was abroad, and the earth and all that grew upon it, or walked its surface, felt the subtle influence. It was a day on which everyone who could sought the sunshine and the open air.

Mr. Elwood had been prevailed upon by his daughter to accompany her for a drive to the township. Miss Elwood acted as driver on this occasion, for she had already learned that accomplishment.

“This glorious weather,” the old man remarked, as they proceeded at a leisurely pace along the road—“this glorious weather, in itself, is enough to make existence enjoyable ; the pulse of life beats stronger, and hope gains new strength within us, with the coming of spring. We have not, it is true, emerged from the cold and deadness of an Old World winter ; the contrast between the seasons is not so marked in this more favoured clime ; but, still, the glad renewal of young life in nature is visible on every hand. Look at those lambs at play in the paddocks, racing in groups of three or four in pure exuberance of pleasure ; and yet there is not wanting even there some shadow of anxiety, for notice how the ewe, with warning bleat, seeks to recall her offspring if, in its heedless frolic, it is carried too far from her side. Earthly happiness, it seems, must be ever tinged with some such shadow of distress.

“But the rough storms with which winter even here sometimes visits us are now left behind; and let us hope, my child,” he went on, “that the bitter blasts of adversity which wrecked my life, and have darkened yours, may be left behind now also. Since we entered on this new life here, and especially during the last week or two, I have begun to feel that they have indeed passed, and to look back on that cruel time as on a horrible nightmare, a blood-chilling dream, only to be remembered as such, and no longer exercising its blighting influence over me and mine.”

“I have noticed this, father,” his daughter answered, with a smile. “I have watched with extreme pleasure the greater interest you are taking in the farm, and the cheerfulness with which you go about what you find to do there. We will agree to blot out that bitter past, and never call up the memories of it again. We shall soon be in the township,” she continued, cheerfully, “and I can see another new house going up. Oh, Bloomsbury will be quite an important town before long. Mr. Ashwin says they are going to build a large hall to hold meetings in; and, you know, several new buildings have gone up even since we came. This *Cosmopolitan Hotel*, that we are coming to, seems to be rather a low place, with generally some half-t tipsy men about. I didn’t quite like passing it when I was riding in alone the other day, for fear some of them should make rude remarks about my horsemanship, for you know I am not a very good rider yet, and Bob is sometimes so obstinate, you know.”

“We must get you a better horse to ride than Bob,” replied her father; “but he must be perfectly quiet and safe, above all things. I will ask Mr. Ashwin to look out for one for you, if he will kindly consent to do so.”

They were now turning the corner on to the main road at the *Cosmopolitan*. Old Dan was sitting on the edge of the verandah, smoking his pipe, and Westall was seated there also; while Davie stood underneath it, leaning against the wall of

the house, for O'Byrne had not yet consented to return home, though he had promised to do so early in the afternoon.

Davie's bulky form was a conspicuous object where he stood, and conspicuous also were the hard-set features of Old Dan.

"Faster, Maud, faster!—for God's sake, faster!" whispered Mr. Elwood, as he turned his head away, after one terror-stricken look at Dan.

Miss Elwood urged the horse past, and then turned to look at her father. The old man sat white-faced and trembling.

"Oh, father! what is it? Are you ill?" she cried. "Or do you know any of those men?"

"One of them, I think, I do know—nay, I am sure of it," he answered, as soon as he had recovered himself. "I could not be mistaken in his evil countenance. Ah, no, indeed! And, Maud, my child, I fear he also has recognised me. One of those men he was with whom I was forced to associate during the black years of misery which, even but now—God help me—we spoke of trying to forget. But we shall not be allowed to forget them. Oblivion in its kindness must not lay its hand upon us. This man was noted amongst the others for his villainy, and, grim and taciturn though he usually was, he would, when annoyed, or when the spirit of evil was strongest upon him, break out into the most loathsome profanities and blasphemous imprecations, and because I remonstrated with him at first, and afterwards shrank from him more, perhaps, than the others, he lost no opportunity of showing me ill will. And now if he has recognised me—as I feel sure he has—he will blazen forth all he knows to my hurt. For myself," he added, sadly, "I would not care, but for you, child, and your brother, it will be hard if you can never escape from the shadow of your father's stain."

"I will bear it patiently and even contentedly as before, if it should fall openly on us again," replied his daughter, "never doubting for a moment your own innocence and goodness. Why should we care so much for the opinions of others when

they are unworthy of respect? Our own inner consciousness of rectitude ought to sustain us when we are unjustly aspersed."

"Ah, Maud, it does, no doubt, and will, in a measure," Mr. Elwood answered; "and it is well to reason thus; but to be shunned and slighted, and looked down upon—or even to be pitied with a self-satisfied condescension, by those whom we are forced to meet in the world, is hard to bear—hard for me, indeed, only in so far as the disgrace affects my children, especially you, Maud, for a boy can battle his way in life, and the world for him is wide, but a stigma, whether merited or not, clings more closely to a girl."

"Never fear for me," his daughter replied brightly (though the tears were not very far from her eyes), and laying her hand fondly upon his, "the path of my duty is clear before me, and whatever may happen I can follow it with cheerfulness."

"God in heaven bless you!" Mr. Elwood said fervently, and then continued with anxiety, "We must not return past that place again. Is there not some other way by which we can get home without passing the *Cosmopolitan* again?"

"There is an unformed cross-road or street at the back of the township which leads on to our road," Miss Elwood answered. "Ted and I rode that way the other day—it is all right for riding on, and I think we can get along it with the buggy. The timber is cleared off the centre, but it is not formed."

And by that route, with some difficulty, they returned: after calling at the post office and the store at which they dealt.

"I seem to be haunted to-day with the presence of the past," Mr. Elwood remarked sadly on the way home. "I saw another face in the township that reminded me somehow of one I used to know; but it was only fancy, no doubt, that led me to think so, excited by the previous recognition of the man on the verandah of the public-house."

"That too may have been only the effect of imagination,

working on some slight resemblance between him and the man you knew many years ago," said his daughter.

"It may have been, it may have been ; but I fear it was not so, dear," replied the old man. "The resemblance was too striking ; and I am afraid that he too knew and remembered me."

"Our fears mislead us often," replied his daughter ; "and even if yours should be justified in this instance, what harm can this man do us now ? He may make known to the little world here the secret of your past life ; but what of that ? It might have been better, perhaps, to have made it known unreservedly on our coming here. I can truthfully say that neither in act, in word, or in look, have I conducted myself otherwise than I should have done had your life-history been laid open to the knowledge of everyone whom we have met ; nor do I think have you, father."

"Perhaps not," he answered. "We have indeed seen very few. We have kept to ourselves, as I purposed we should in coming here, saying nothing of my previous life—averring nothing and denying nothing ; yet I must confess that lately in conferring with Mr. Ashwin, who may be called our only friend here, I have been inclined to forget myself a little, indulging in hopes and dreaming of a future for our life here in which the baneful influence of the days gone bye should not be felt. But these hopes were vain, and must now be cast aside. The present, the future, must ever be the thrall of the past and under bondage to it. There is no place on earth, it seems, where I may flee away to and be at rest."

His daughter tried to cheer him with loving words of comfort and hopeful assurances that, even if his fears were realised, they could still by uprightness of life and mutual affection defy and in the end live down the uncharitable chatter of the world without ; but the old man, though he blessed her for the words of hope and consolation, was still cast down in spirit.

Nearing home, they met Frank Ashwin, who was riding towards the township, and who drew up pleasantly, and made polite enquiries after Mr. Elwood's and his daughter's health. Showing a friendly interest in the operations on the farm, and a hopeful concern as to the prospects of the season, he seemed inclined to detain them in a lengthy chat, during which, though his words were oftener directed towards the father, yet his eyes nearly always were attracted to the fair face of the daughter. But Mr. Elwood appeared out of sorts, and evinced little of the usual interest which he took in the subjects broached. The face of Old Dan still haunted him. Miss Elwood, too, Ashwin thought, seemed even colder and more self-withdrawn, in her manner towards him than she had lately become. He could not understand it; and taking his leave he cantered off towards Bloomsbury, while the buggy proceeded slowly in the opposite direction.

"It will be a relief to me when he knows all," thought Miss Elwood, and, in spite of her resolve to be cheerful, there came a look of wistful sadness into her eyes for a moment as she gazed far out away towards the horizon.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE fears entertained by Mr. Elwood that Old Dan had recognised him were only too well grounded. Dan, after steadily eyeing the occupants of the buggy, and noticing the startled look, the averting of the head, and evident discomposure of the old man, gave a start of surprise himself, and turning to Westall, asked, with a degree of excitement unusual to him, "Who the devil's that?"

Westall answered that he believed it was a Mr. Elwood, with his daughter, who had lately settled in the neighbourhood. "At least," he said, "I was told that was the name. I have seen the girl once or twice in the township, or passing here, but I have not seen the old man himself out before. He keeps pretty close at home, I believe—I remember seeing him, though, as Davie and I passed his place, the first day we came here—it's about three miles out."

Dan had leaped to his feet, "Be the Holy Vargin, I know him," he exclaimed. "I have wondhered to meself many's the toime where the ould bloke had got to—I was told his wife had money. Elwood is it now, ye call him—a foine respectable ould gentleman he'll be, to be sure, now—carries his head high, I'll be bound—among the best in the land. Och! me saintly ould hypocrite, to think it's meself should drap across ye here —huigh," and Dan, in the fulness of his heart at seeing again an old acquaintance, twirled round his head the stick he

usually carried, and danced half a dozen steps of a hornpipe.

"Elwood is it he calls himself now?" he again said.

"Why, what was he called when you knew him, if he is the man you take him to be?" asked Westall, evidently much interested.

"Number thirty-sivin," replied Dan, and touched his ankle significantly with his stick. "Be me sowl, it's the broad arrow he carries about wid him, respectable ould gentleman though he looks. Drivin' in his buggy, to be sure, now—och, it's quality we are, rale, downright quality, wid the devil a spick on our reputation at all at all." And Dan laughed a mocking laugh, and was nearly giving a few more steps of the hornpipe.

"Don't you remember what his real name was?" Westall asked, with increasing interest.

"Sure, an' it was mostly by the number, or by the Christian name, or by some nickname, we—lastewise they, I mane—were called—more be token, it was whin he was a ticket-av-lave man that I knowed him—Cantin' Charley he wint by ginerally. But his other name, now?—I ought to remimber it, too, for I heerd it more than wanst—it's runnin' through me head like a rat round a cage, but the devil a out it'll come. Begorra, I forgot."

Westall sat for a while deep in thought.

"Twenty years or more since I saw him—could this be he?" he said to himself. "This man looks too old, but then old age is not governed and determined by the number of years; these trip lightly to the end with some, showing but little imprint of their passage, while over others, heavy-footed, they drag their weary way, leaving deep dents behind. There is certainly some resemblance, or so at least I thought there was on the day I saw him in the garden with his daughter—he was smiling at some remark she made then. To-day I saw but little of his face. How strange it would be if this indeed were he—how could I meet him?—the other here also. But this

old ruffian, Dan, who has evidently been an old 'leg' himself, may have been mistaken in his man."

"I have it," exclaimed Old Dan, "av ye care to hear it. Faces I can remember wid any man—I niver forgit a face, but names do bother me a bit. But, faith, I've got hould av this wan—he's out at last—Hartland was his name."

"My God, I thought so!" cried Westall.

"Did ye know him, thin?" Dan asked.

"Well, I remember the case," Westall answered, with some hesitation. "It was in my part of the country, you know; I knew the man, by sight—defrauding of creditors and forgery and that sort of thing, I believe, if I remember rightly. A bad case—ten years he got, I think."

"The very same, I'll be bound," said Dan; "an' now he's afther comin' the foine gintleman over us—drivin' in his carriage he is, wid servints to wait on him, the divil a doubt. Och, it's as good as a play, an' more divartin'!"

"And who may the foine gintleman be ye're afther meetin'?" asked O'Byrne, who with Jacob, the landlord, just then came out of the hotel and heard Old Dan's last remarks.

"Dan has seen an auld acquaintance o' his," said Davie, who had been an interested listener to the conversation and had watched all that had taken place, "an' is muckle pleased at the thocht o' meetin' wi' him again; but I'm dootfu' if his freen' is ower weel pleased to see him. Gentleman or gaol-bird, I dinna weel ken which, but it's likely enoo it's baith he'll be, I'm thinkin', for it's no' the first time that gentlefolk, or them that ea' themsels sae, hae made the acquaintance o' the inside o' a gaol, or hae wore the leg irons for the matter o' that, as Dan's freen' seems to hae done."

"Be the powers, thin, Dan had betther be afther lavin' his ould frinds av that complexion to take their own coorse—scrub their own acre, an' cut down their own tree," Dennis remarked, somewhat warmly.

"Ay, but this is ane o' yer swell folk, man, wha drives his

buggy an' a' that. There's nane o' yer loup-the-dykes aboot him—nane ither than Mr. Elwood here. I ken his place weel, an' had a meal there ance. The dochter's a bonny lassie an' kindly, I'll say that aboot her ony way ; an' I'm gye pleased to think that I may be better acquaint wi' her before lang. Nae doot," he continued, with a chuckle, " we'll a' be aften invited up to tea there noo, when Dan has ance made his boo an' foregaithered wi' his auld time freen's. I'm no' saft on ony ither lass, an' Dennis 'll hae his Molly to gang coortin' wi', sae I can juist tak' the dochter oot for a walk, cannily by oorsels, while Dan here has his crack wi' the auld man."

Dan had relapsed into his usual taciturnity, but did not quite relish Davie's attempt at jocularity. The excitement of seeing again in this unexpected way the ex-convict with whom he had worked in former years, and against whom, for some reason which he himself could not define nor understand, he had borne the deepest animosity, had carried him out of his usual self, and led him into a display of feeling which was foreign to his nature.

"Vell I never," Brasch chimed in, "who vould have believed it. To tink dis yentlemans vas an oldt 'leg.' Von has to be very careful in dis contry who von makes his friendts."

"Ye'll need hae nae fear o' him if he's a freen' o' Dan's," said Davie ; "if Auld Dan gies bail for ony ane, ye can tak yer aith that he's a' richt. I'll hae nae doobt but Dan, when he made the puir chield's acquaintance on the ither side, will hae been a veesitin' justice—a gaol chaplain, mebbe, or faither confessor, or somethin' equally respectable ; I aye kenned he was somebody aboon the common."

There was a vengeful gleam in Old Dan's eyes, and he muttered something to himself about "rippin' somebody's b—— liver" ; but he said nothing openly in reply to Davie's badinage.

In the afternoon, when O'Byrne had caught the horse, and

he and Davie were preparing to start homewards, the latter said to Dan :

“ Ye’ll no’ be comin’ wi’ us juist yet, I’m thinkin’. Ye’ll be for drinkin’ tea, nae doobt, wi’ yer freen’ o’ auld lang syne. Weel, gie my respecks to the bonny lassie, an’ tell her I canna weel get oot to see her the nicht, but I’ll no fail to gang wi’ ye next time. Ye can aye pit in a guid word for me, ye ken—a guid word frae you, bein’ an auld freen’ o’ the faimily’s, will gang a lang way. She’s a braw lass, an’ ll hae a bonnie bit tocher, I’m thinkin’.”

“ What the devil are ye jabberin’ about? ” said O’Byrne. “ Av coarse Dan’s goin’ home with us. Sure, an’ wasn’t it to fetch us home that he came down here? If ye have met with wan av yer ould acquaintances, ” said he, addressing Dan, with some warmth, “ faith, an’ ye had betther lave him to himself. I’m tellin’ ye, now, if it’s not home ye’re goin’, be the powers, thin an’ nayther am I! ”

“ Av coarse I’m goin’ home, ” said Dan, who had, however, been thinking seriously of stopping where he was for the night, “ av coarse I’m goin’ home. It’s only this — — — of a Scotchman that’s asther tryin’ to poke fun at me, he is. Be me sowl, he’d betther be kapin’ a civil tongue in his head! ”

Dan went home with the others ; but he had made up his mind to slip back here on the morrow, go out to Elwood’s place, and force his hateful presence on the man whom he had recognised as a former associate in the convict gang. The temptation to do so was too strong for him. He looked forward with fiendish pleasure to the opportunity he would have of triumphing in exultant mockery over one whom he still regarded with enmity—enmity which was deepened and embittered now by the sight of the other’s apparent prosperity and respectable position. He gloated over the discomfiture and humiliation of the other when his erstwhile companion of the hulks and penal settlement would stand before him and heap insult and shame upon his head.

He resolved to force an interview with him on the following day ; and he carried out his resolution. But in the meantime he trudged home to the wharé along with Davie and O'Byrne.

CHAPTER XX.

A MEETING of the Bloomsbury Racing Club was called for that same evening at eight o'clock, in the Criterion Hotel ; and, about an hour before the time appointed, several of the boarders and two or three others were seated in the snug semi-private parlour of that hostelry, most of them enjoying an after-dinner smoke.

Wilmot was there, and also Spalding, the Bank agent—both being boarders, and Ponsonby also ; and amongst others Frank Ashwin, who had come in for the meeting. Morton was also there, having only returned from town that evening. He had dined at the Criterion, and intended riding home shortly. He was not a member of the racing club, and rarely or never put in an appearance on a racecourse.

"The 'grand old English sport' has borne transplanting well, and is making vigorous growth in the colonies," he said on one occasion when asked to join the club. "The 'sport of kings' is now the sport of everybody ; but, as we find it now it is only a pretence—nothing but a pleasant and convenient machine for gambling with, a machine that can be pulled and manipulated by every rogue—and rogues are plentiful enough—that owns a horse or rides one. Your 'noble sport' would be dead as Pharaoh's donkey in six months, if it were possible to set it on its own feet and shake it clear of gambling. Why, even your wives and daughters wouldn't sit out two events if they couldn't invest in a tote ticket or a half-crown sweep. A man must have a long purse or loose principles who can stick

to racing for any considerable length of time. The happy hunting-ground of blacklegs, the spieler's harvest field are your race meetings—the baited trap for youth, the outer court of embezzlement and crime, the passage-way to prison. The racehorse is a noble animal, I admit, but he appears to exercise a strangely demoralising influence over those who have most to do with him."

Bob Powlet, the landlord and proprietor of the Criterion, was also in the room, standing with his back to the fire, which he had just replenished with another log. Rotund and rubicund he was as usual, and with his habitual good-humoured expression of face. Bob took the world pretty easy in general now; and he was the better enabled to do so for the reason that his helpmate, Mrs. Powlet, seemed to find her greatest pleasure in bustling about—keeping an eye on everything, a strict supervision over all that was going on in or about the hotel, excepting, of course, the stables, which Powlet kept pridefully under his own particular inspection.

The house was a model of cleanliness in all departments—the beds and bedrooms being especially noted for this, and their more than ordinary comfort. From early morning till late at night Mrs. Powlet's vigilance knew little abatement; and the decisive though cheery tones of her voice were to be heard in one place or another—directing her servants, or sometimes perhaps admonishing her husband in a pleasant way, or returning in similar vein the cordial greeting of a caller, or the humorous raillery of some frequenter of the place, or, it might be, on some rare occasion, ordering an objectionable fellow in the bar to conduct himself properly, or leave, else she would be obliged to have him turned out with little ceremony.

Her servants were all of irreproachable character and of a superior class; and over the female portion of them she kept a motherly eye. There was no loitering in the passages for them; no flirting or skylarking between the domestics and any of the visitors or boarders was allowed at the Criterion.

Mr. Ponsonby felt the weight of Mrs. Powlet's reproof, given in a way that he remembered, when on one occasion she caught him attempting to kiss one of the girls in the long corridor upstairs.

"Gentlemen," she said, "ought to know better. It might be all very well for them to take a kiss in innocent frolic; but the girl mightn't look at it in that way—and it mightn't be done in innocent frolic at all; and one thing might lead to another. You must remember, Mr. Ponsonby, it is very easy to injure a girl's good name. My girls are respectable, and I mean to keep them so, as far as lies in my power. I don't object to any of them having a lover in a decent young man of their own class, willing to wed; but you know, Mr. Ponsonby, that you have no intention of being a lover of that kind, and so you must understand that this sort of thing mustn't take place. Powlet and I"—she always liked to combine her husband's authority with her own, though it is doubtful if in this matter Bob would have taken quite so serious a view—"Powlet and I intend to keep this house respectable and above the breath of scandal, and if any gentleman boarders don't like the way we conduct it, why, they can just seek fresh quarters."

Ponsonby, in his drawling way, said the house was everything that could be desired, and promised that he would not again give occasion for rebuke; but added to himself, after she left him, "What a demmed over-scrupulous little martinet she is, to be sure, to deny a girl the luxury of a kiss when a gentleman is condescending enough to take one." And Ponsonby carefully kept his promise, as far as the maids of the Criterion were concerned; but just now he was anxious to press his condescensions in another quarter.

Powlet was very fond of his wife, and proud of her, speaking in her praise whenever opportunity offered, and holding her up as a model of all wisely virtues.

He allowed her to have her own way in most things; and

some people were uncharitable enough to say that he was entirely under her rule and domination—that the grey mare was the better horse, but this was hardly correct. He could put his foot down and assert his authority if the occasion called for this display of masculine firmness ; but the occasion rarely or never did call for it in the domestic relations between himself and his wife, and he was content to sail along, no doubt very much under her guidance, but with full confidence in her management of affairs.

“It’s a born gift,” he would say, “a born gift with some women, is management. Look at my wife, now—this house and everything in it has got to go like clockwork. She has got it all between her finger and thumb”—and he snapped his own. There’s never any hitch here ; sale day or race time, it’s all the same. What I’m afeard of is, she’ll wear herself out. If she was to knock up, it would be the mainspring of the clockwork gone, I can tell you. But,” he added, “I believe it agrees with her. What would wear many another woman to the bone is just meat and drink to her. If she was to be laid up for a fortnight, I don’t know but what it might go hard with her ; but it would be the lying in bed that would kill her, and not bein’ able to keep her eye on things. But look at her—you wouldn’t take her to be a grandmother, would you?”—(they had a married daughter). “She’s as fresh and as young-looking as many a woman not half her age. Ha,” he went on, “my advice to young fellows who want to marry is: look out for the girl that’s likely to make a nice, good-looking old woman.”

The occupants of the room on this evening spoke indifferently on several subjects, though Morton remained silent, smoking his pipe and turning over the leaves of a periodical till appealed to by Wilmot.

“Well, Mr. Morton,” said that gentleman, in his rather pompous way, “and how are things just now in the city, from which, I understand, you have just returned? I suppose, now,

that our Members of Parliament have deserted the halls of legislation and gone back to their domestic hearths and usual avocations; the citizens will be beginning to complain of slackness of business again, viewing, with regret, the departure of that concourse of visitors which the Session necessarily brings to the Empire City."

"The Empire City I found very much as usual," answered Morton. "The struggle for existence is carried on there but little differently to what it is elsewhere—rougery and sharp practice generally have the best of it. These mostly can keep the dry and sunny side of the thoroughfare, while honesty has to foot the gutters. At any rate, whether rogues or honest, fools or wise, men keep jostling along, there as elsewhere, each in his own little miserable two-legged individuality. Most of them—and that's where the comicality comes in—most of them big with a sense of their own importance." And Morton laughed.

"True in a sense, no doubt, Mr. Morton," Wilmot replied: "but you will excuse me when I say that—ha, ha!—you are given to look too much, perhaps, on the—a—sombre and less hopeful side of things. The evils under which our present state of society labours are, surely, capable of cure or of amelioration. We must look to legislation to protect the honest against the depredations of the rogues; to guard the weak and incapable from the rapacity of the vicious and the strong; to hold its ægis over the deserving; to rescue poverty from beneath the grinding heel of a too grasping, a too unfeeling wealth. This may have been impossible in the past, sir," continued Mr. Wilmot, warming to his subject, "when legislation was in the hands of a few—of a select, a selfish, and a narrow-minded minority; but now, sir, when democracy has broken down the barriers which too long have held it confined, we may expect greater beneficence and wider sympathies to become apparent in our statutes and enactments, a more tender regard for the interests of our workers, a wider opening to them of the gates of opportunity."

“Capital, Mr. Wilmot ; capital !” laughed Morton in his cynical way. “That would take well from the hustings. I see you are preparing yourself for an election contest. ‘A wider opening of the gates of opportunity’—a good idea certainly, and somewhat poetically expressed. To drop into poetry itself is sometimes a good thing in a public address, and a rousing verse or couplet will often bring the house down better than anything else—to finish up with one answers well. But cram the Statute-book, Act on Act, and pile them up, volume on volume, only take care you don’t block up the ‘gates of opportunity’ with them. However, by all means let the working man, as he is called, or you gentlemen who are so anxious to take him under your wing, have a turn at the legislative machine, and see what can be done with it—not much good in my opinion. But he or you will not be much worse, I suppose, than your predecessors in power were. The big land-owners had their day, and tried to make the best of it. The missionaries had their opportunity first, and, people say, most of them didn’t let it slip—bartered the bread of life—as they call it—for broad acres. Then your lawyers have grown fat on native pastures. Let Horny-hands now by all means shove his fist in—let him have an innings at law-making, if he thinks he can do himself any good by it, poor fool. The uselessness of legislation will come home to him in time, perhaps : but in the meanwhile let him amuse himself with it. He thinks he can revolutionise the world by making laws, but he’ll find he’ll have to leave it very much where he found it—in a worse state perhaps. It is too incorrigibly bad for any remedies, quack or other.”

“Perhaps so,” Wilmot answered, with a wave of his hand ; “we do not expect to—a—make a heaven here just yet—we don’t look for the millenium for some time. We are not—at least I am not—going to advocate any revolutionary measures —no socialism for me, sir ; but look at the advances which the world has made during the last few generations. The diffusion

of knowledge has been widely extended ; education has been placed within the reach of all. We have gained wisdom from the lessons, the mistakes, of those who have gone before. Our rising generation are, surely, better equipped for the battle of life than their forefathers were. The accumulated experience of the past is a legacy to them. They are the 'heirs of all the ages.'

"Ha, ha, ha!" broke in Morton. "The 'heirs of all the ages'—look at them when you see them, and admire them. The soulless larrikins of your street-corners—the blackguard barrackers of your football fields ; for these are they. Look at them and admire them."

"Well, well," said Wilmot, somewhat taken aback ; "there are always exceptions, always exceptions. But Liberalism," he went on—"Liberalism has been marching onward with giant strides, sir ; and she must continue to advance."

"Look out she doesn't turn the corner, and work backwards on you ; or she may be travelling in a circle," said Morton, again interrupting.

"And must continue to advance," Wilmot went on, not heeding the interruption. "The State has a noble field before it for the exercise of its functions. We have accomplished much, but more remains to be done. The majority, sir, will now consider its own interests, and legislate for the furtherance and protection of these, whether we may like it or not. The working-classes especially will be taken under the guardianship of the State. The working-man will emancipate himself from the bondage of the past. He will fence himself round so that the avarice and cupidity of his employer may not deprive him of his rights. Legislative enactments will guard him on every side. Now that he has the power, he will clothe himself in a coat of proof against the assaults and exactions of a hitherto dominant and privileged class."

"He'll make a reg'lar hedgehog of himself if he does," Powlet here exclaimed. "Let the Government stick him full

of spikes, and no one that can help it will have anything to do with him, and then see if he'll get fat in his coat of proof, as you call it. The working-man used to be able to take care of himself in this country without a lot of Acts of Parliament stickin' in him, and it's my belief he can still do it. I carried my swag at first, and was often enough glad to get a job at anything ; but *I* never wanted the Government to take care of *me*."

"Ah, but Powlet," said Spalding, "times have changed since then, and the Government is expected to have a fatherly eye over us now and all our belongings. The majority must rule, you know ; and we'll have to do what they think right, and do it under their inspection too. The majority are going to have their own way in future."

"A man'll soon not be able to spank his youngsters, or kiss his wife, unless he gets a permit, and does it under some inspector sent round by the majority. D——n the majority," said Bob, warmly. "But here comes Mrs. Powlet," he continued, as that good lady appeared in the doorway. "Gad, I wonder what *she* would say to that sort of thing ;" and he laughed his hearty laugh.

"Oh, here you are," said Mrs. Powlet—"you're wanted in the bar, Bob ; and, Mr. Wilmot, there's a man wants to see you. He's waiting in the passage by the bar."

"Don't be long, Wilmot," said Spalding. "We must soon begin with the meeting. Time's about up ; and you have got to take the chair, you know. We are all here now, I think, who are likely to attend." Two or three other members of the Racing Club had just entered, among whom was Corcoran, of the *Guardian*.

Morton took his departure now ; and Wilmot went out to meet the person who had sent in the message by Mrs. Powlet.

It was our old acquaintance, Westall.

"Hullo, is it you ?" Wilmot said, when he saw who it was,

and continued in a low but displeased voice as he led the way outside. "What the devil brought you here? Did I not tell you to keep to yourself and not cross my way, except when you come to the office for your remittance. I have no time to talk with you now. Money, I suppose you want? Well, you needn't expect more out of me than you have been getting."

"It's not that at all," Westall replied. "It's not money I want—and I may never again take any of your money from you. Look here," and Westall bent forward and whispered some words in Wilmot's ear. The latter started, and said, "Nonsense man—you've been drinking—got *d.t's*, and been seeing more than was to be seen. But I can't stop to hear your tale now. If there's anything in it come and see me on the quiet to-morrow—but let me see—to-morrow I'll be out in the country all day. I'll tell you, though—I'll be riding back toward evening by the Melton Road. Meet me a mile or two out, and then I'll listen to all you have got to say. Off you go now and brace up your nerves with another whisky or two;" and he added to himself as Westall turned and walked away, "I only wish you would make haste and kill yourself with whisky or something else."

He turned into the hotel again and joined his companions, and, though startled and deeply moved by that which Westall had communicated to him, he allowed no symptoms of the agitation to appear in his countenance or demeanour, but took a leading part in the meeting which was at once held, and entered into all matters affecting the coming races with as much zeal as any of the other members of the club.

CHAPTER XXI.

ON the following afternoon, Westall, as directed by Wilmot, strolled out along the road indicated, which was that leading past Ashwin's. It would in the future, when formed and metalled all the way, be the direct road to the Melton district. Beyond a distance of a few miles from Bloomsbury it was, however, impassable, or next to impassable, for wheel traffic for most of the year, but was used, except in the dead of winter, a good deal by persons travelling on horseback, who took it in preference to the other road between the two places, which, if in better repair, was circuitous, and longer by a good many miles.

Two or three weeks of dry weather and the increasing heat of the sun had now made the road, right through, comfortably passable, and fair riding for equestrians, except in a few places, which still remained soft and boggy.

Westall proceeded at a leisurely pace for some miles, but saw as yet no sign of the returning Wilmot. He passed Morton's place, where he saw Frank Ashwin talking with the owner, and evidently about to ride away. After he had gone a little farther Ashwin overtook him, recognised and spoke to him, and then rode on slowly ahead, stock-whip in hand, for he had been helping Morton to muster his cattle, some of which were rather wild.

When Ashwin had reached the gate leading to Elwood's house, Westall saw him hastily dismount and pass in, and shortly afterwards he heard loud and angry tones, and was

astonished to see Old Dan issue from the gateway, turn round on the road, and shake his stick defiantly at someone inside, who was screened from Westall's gaze by some young trees which had attained sufficient growth to hide any object of a man's height.

As Old Dan turned towards him, Westall could see the gleam of devilish exultation which overspread his features, mingled, however, with the darker hue of malignant hate against the person who had been for the moment the object of his threats.

“He would use his b——y stock-whip on me agin, would he?” almost shrieked Dan, hardly conscious as yet of Westall's presence. “He would lash me from here to Bloomsbury, would he, if I iver set fut inside the gate agin? Let the — — — look to himself — or, mebbe, his horse 'll go home widout a rider some av these nights. The girl's fancy man, I'll go bail—he can make love now, if he likes, to the ould ‘leg's’ daughter, as I tould him. Ha, ha, ha! the virtuous ould gentleman was overcome entoirely at the sight av me. Well, people will be afther knowin' him in his true colours now. The ould convict won't be able to drive about an' look down on his betthers after this, I'll be bound now.”

“It's really the man you thought it was, then?” asked Westall.

“To be sure it is,” Dan answered. “The devil a fear av me mistakin' him. If he lived to the age av Methuselah I'd know the ould Pharisee's face agin. Och, it was great intoirely,” and Dan laughed diabolically.

Westall, though weak, and in many respects culpable, enfeebled in mind and body by years of dissipation, and tainted and made callous morally by long association with much that was low and perhaps criminal in life, had yet some better feelings lying overweighted and dormant within him, and these awoke and struggled to assert themselves as he listened to Old Dan's malicious satisfaction at the injury and pain he had inflicted on an inoffensive old man.

"Don't you think the old man has suffered enough already?" he said. "Couldn't you leave him to himself to live out the rest of his days in peace? He may have been innocent—he was innocent. You're a damned hardened old villain, that's what you are, at any rate; and if Ashwin has cut you across the thigh with his stock-whip, as I see he has—and pretty deep too, it only serves you right," and Westall turned hotly from him and walked away rapidly in the direction in which he had previously been going. When he had gained an ascent on the road where he could overlook Elwood's house, he stopped and turned towards it, and taking off his hat made a vow to himself that he would yet right wrong as far as lay in his power.

Meanwhile Old Dan, after cursing Westall, took the direction of the township, muttering to himself as he went—at one time breaking out into a satanic laugh, at another uttering direful maledictions or quivering with suppressed hate, as he looked on his injured leg or felt the pain of it.

He called at the *Cosmopolitan* and had a few whiskies there, and gave Brasch a version of his interview with Mr. Elwood, or "Cantin' Charley" as he called him. He then trudged off homewards, and, after arriving there, went on the "burst" for a week.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN Old Dan paid his visit, Mr. Elwood was engaged sowing some vegetable seeds in his garden, which lay at the side of the house on the right, but partly between it and the road. Though the incident of the previous day, and the associations which it recalled, remained fresh in his mind, he was able now to look with more resignation on the prospect of his past history being made the common talk of the neighbourhood, and employed himself as usual. "It is the will of God," he said, "that my former life, with all its wrongs and sorrows, must be kept continually before me and my children. I must submit."

He had his back towards the gate, and was so busily engaged in his occupation that he did not see the approach of his dreaded acquaintance of olden days till he was close upon him. Dan had stood looking over the gate with a grin of satisfaction on his hard face for a minute or so before he entered. He then advanced as noiselessly as he could, as if desirous of watching the effect a sudden surprise would have on his victim.

"Any chance of a job, yer honour?"

Elwood started at the sound of a voice which he remembered too well; and when he looked round and saw the exultant leer on that face which he had but too truly instantly recognised the day before, he was speechless. White-faced and trembling, he leant heavily for support on the spade which he had been using.

"Be the powers!" exclaimed Dan, as if he had only that moment made the discovery, "if it isn't me ould frind Charley—Cantin' Charley, we used to call ye in thim days! Number thirty-siven, how are ye, me boy?"—and Dan reached out his hand.—"Oh, it's proud ye are, is it? Nivver mind thin—sure, an' it gives me the greatest plisure in life, intoirely, now, to see ye wanst more, even if it's proud ye are an' won't shake hands. Oh, it's mesilf would nivver trate an ould frind in that way. Begorra, now I've found ye, I'll not lose sight av ye agin! Faith, an' it's purty snug ye are here," he went on, looking round about him, "purty snug, faith—oh, lave ye alone for that—an' a respectable mimber av society ye'll be, to be sure; but ye would nivver have the heart to turn yer back on me, would ye? It's a gardener ye'll be wantin' now, for sure, or a coachman? Oh, it's mesilf would sit up on the sate beside ye, an' talk to ye about the ould days!"

"Go away, wretched man!" said Elwood, partially recovering himself. "We have nothing in common, and never had, except the outward form of humanity and the lot in which it was my bitter misfortune to be forced to associate with you. You were always my implacable enemy, though God knows you never suffered injury at my hands. I may have sought to raise your thoughts, and those of our companions, to higher things; and to lift our lives out of the pit of hell into which they were being sunk, but I found but little success. My reward from most of you—from you in particular, who were always to the front in villainy—was only to be scorned and abused and jeered at, with other treatment too foul to be named."

"An' it wasn't ye that got me the lash, ayther, ye pious ould fraud, ye!" said Dan, savagely.

"Not through me was the villainy discovered that was the cause of your receiving it," Elwood answered. "When it was found out, and the truth demanded of me and others, I could only speak what I knew, and if I had held my tongue, it would

not have saved you, though it might have let an innocent man suffer also."

Miss Elwood had come on the verandah, and seeing the stranger, and hearing his last question, she knew at once who he was. She hastened to her father's side, and stood there with indignant mien, and with flashing eyes and heightened colour, willing to interpose herself between him and any threatened danger, casting the protection of her presence over the old man who still leaned upon his spade.

"Go away, you evil man! What brought you here?" she said. "You have no right to intrude yourself upon us. We do not care for anything you may do or say. My father has the consciousness of innocence to shield and sustain him."

"Och, me beauty! is it you?" Dan replied, jeeringly. "A b—— fine lady ye'll be now, the divil a doubt av it. Isn't it ashamed av yersilf ye are, treatin' an ould frind av the family asther this fashion—orderin' him aff the premises, indade? It's settin' yer cap ye are at some av the gay young gintlemen about here. Faith, an' whin they know what ye are, they'll come coortin' ye—the ould convict's daughter—won't they, now? It's a left-handed coortship they'll be for givin' ye, but the divil a marry, I'm thinkin'," and in still fouler terms and louder tones Dan continued his taunts.

"Go in, my child, go in," cried Elwood, excitedly, "do not let your ears take in the horrible insults of this obscene wretch. I will drive him from the place." And uplifting his spade, and forgetting his feebleness in the moment of excitement, he advanced on Dan. But timely assistance was at hand. Ashwin, riding along, had for some time noticed the group engaged, as it were, in conversation; but when he had drawn nearer and reached the gate, he judged by what he then saw, and, indeed, from what he heard, though imperfectly, that something was wrong; and hurriedly dismounting and throwing the reins over the gate, he entered just in time to see the excited advance of Mr. Elwood with the uplifted spade in his hands. With a few

rapid strides he covered the ground that lay between him and the apparently would-be combatants. For Old Dan had stood his ground, and brandishing his heavy stick, was pouring forth words of foul profanity in defiance. Elwood's advance was, indeed, checked by his daughter, who, now with pale and frightened looks, had sprung forward and seized her father's arm, imploring him, at the same time, to come with her into the house, and get away out of sight and hearing of the wretched man.

Ashwin did not wait to enquire for cause or explanation of the scene he was witness to, but in the threatening gestures of Old Dan, and more especially in the imprecations and loathsome language which he was giving vent to in Miss Elwood's presence, he saw and heard enough to rouse in him the deepest indignation; and casting loose, as he went, the stockwhip which he still carried—a stockwhip that many a rowdy bullock before now had felt the hide-raising cut of—he swung it round his head, and with unerring aim brought the knotted end of the lash down on Dan's leg with such skill and force that both cloth and skin were lifted by it, and a gash left in the flesh. With a howl of rage and pain Dan sprang in the air, and turned on Ashwin; and with a murderous look on his face, appeared as if he would rush in and close with him. But in the strong and active young form, and in the determined eyes before him, he saw enough to daunt his courage; besides, the terrible stockwhip was again making the circuit of Ashwin's head, and, fearful of another taste of its quality, Old Dan turned tail and ran; but stopped when near the gate to hurl back his parting maledictions.

“Ye b—— b——, I'll have yer b—— life for this. Go in an' comfort the ould 'leg' an' his daughter—ye're her fancy-man, I suppose. Me curse on the lot av yez—on you an' on the ould convict an' his daughter.”

“Off you go, or I'll score your back for you this time,”

said Ashwin, making towards the retreating Dan. "Off you go, and if ever I find you near this place again I'll lash you from here to Bloomsbury."

Elwood, the strength which the excitement had for the moment given him having left him, now stood, weak and trembling, supported by his daughter, who spoke to him sweet and soothing words of comfort. Ashwin hastened to join them, and helped the old man to the house.

"Thank you—thank you for this, Mr. Ashwin," he said, as he walked rather unsteadily thither. "I am all right now—it was only a little weakness—overcome by the presence of that man. It was foolish of me to attempt to drive him away, but the language he was using in my daughter's ears, and to her, made me forget I was old and feeble. You heard what he said," he continued, after he was seated inside. "You heard what he called me. It is indeed too true. Bear with me a little till I have recovered myself, and I will tell you the story of my life—I owe this to you. Since our coming here we have lived quietly to ourselves. We have not, I think, sought to push ourselves into the society of others—I hope we have not. I trust that you, whom we have seen most of, will not think that we have."

"God knows you have not," ejaculated Ashwin.

"When we came here, strangers," the old man continued, "you in your great kindness of heart sought me out, and, seeing that the life, the occupation, I was entering on was in a great measure new and strange to me, you offered me, with becoming diffidence indeed, your counsel and assistance; and that counsel and ready help have since then been always at my service—even before they were asked for—and have been invaluable to me."

"All I have done has been indeed very little, Mr. Elwood," Ashwin replied; "and I am pleased to think that you have found that little of some use, and availed yourself of it—as I hope you will continue to do."

Mr. Elwood answered, "You are indeed generous," and continued, "If in our past intercourse I may have at times forgotten for the moment what I was—and what I am; if in the interest which I was beginning to feel in the concerns of the farm and in our surroundings here under new and happier conditions of existence, I have allowed a veil to drop between me and the past; if I have on occasion spoken or acted as if no cloud of sorrow and degradation lay upon my life; if I did not think I was called upon, or if I lacked the courage, to make the avowal that it was a convicted felon with whom you were associating, I must implore your forgiveness. I might, indeed, plead as an excuse that I had the consciousness of innocence to uphold me—the knowledge that I was not guilty of the charge on which I was convicted; that I suffered for the criminal acts of another, in whom, my only fault was, I reposed too much trust; and that, knowing and feeling this, I could hold myself the peer of any honest man, nor think he could receive contamination from my touch. But I do not expect you or others to believe all this, and I will plead for no consideration on that behalf. The plea of injured innocence is too commonly put forward by the guilty, and I should be foolish to urge it in my case, or expect it to influence the minds of others."

"I am willing to believe in your innocence, Mr. Elwood," Ashwin said. "Crime and the criminal nature will nearly always lay their mark on a man's countenance, and your face and bearing, if I am any judge, are those of an honest man. I believe you to be innocent. But even if it were not so, I for one am prepared to make every allowance for human frailty. In a moment of weakness and under heavy pressure, a man may step over the boundary line between right and wrong—perhaps take for his own use money placed in his charge—take it temporarily, as he thinks at first, confident that he will be able to make restitution, and with the determination to do so; but his expectations tumble about his ears, he gets from bad to

worse, and at last is landed in the dock. Our neighbour, Morton, was saying only to-day that half the men in the world ought to be in gaol, and would have been sent there at some period of their lives only their misdemeanours didn't happen to be found out; while with most of the other half it was the force of circumstances, the want of opportunity, or the absence of any occasion for exercising their criminal propensities that kept them straight. I should be sorry to think as badly of the world as Morton does, but there is some truth in what he says."

"Some little truth, no doubt," said Mr. Elwood; "but mankind is not so black as he would paint it. There is also to be found much that is upright, and honourable, and true. Mr. Morton's cynical views are not the best, nor would the acceptance of them be likely to work any improvement in society. Neither should human weakness be put forward in justification of wrong-doing, though it may, and should, evoke a feeling of pity for the transgressor.

"But I thank you, Mr. Ashwin, for your kindly assurance of confidence and belief in the innocence of one who had no right to expect such generous treatment, and who has not expected it. But I must warn you that you will stand alone, or almost alone, in this, and may suffer in the opinion of others if you were to act up to your belief, and continue on terms of intimacy with me. The world is apt to take the least charitable view of things. Few, indeed, in any case would attach any weight to the ex-convict's assertion that he had borne another's penalty, or believe in his innocence if he were foolish enough to proclaim it. I must still live under the ban of the criminal. The stain must rest on me, and also, alas, though in a more remote degree, on those dear to me. For myself, I need care but little for the slights or the taunts of the world. What I have endured makes even these seem but trifles. My life must, in the course of nature, soon draw to a close, and the grave cover it, but to leave a heritage of shame to my children is indeed a hard thought to bear resignedly.

“I promised, however, to give you some details of my past life—to lay bare to you what I, perhaps, should not have left so long unrevealed. Thank you, my child,” he added, as his daughter placed beside him a cup of tea which she had made haste to prepare. “Sit down by me, Maud, while I tell Mr. Ashwin something of my history—your presence will comfort and sustain me, as it always does.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I NEED not take you back beyond a quarter of a century, or rather less," Mr. Elwood began. "At that time I was a partner in a business house in one of the provincial centres of England—Bristol it was. The business was that of merchants and general agents. It was an old-established one, having been carried on under the same title by succeeding members of the same two families for several generations. Hartland and Wilson was the name of the firm, and at that time I was the senior member of it, and about thirty-five years of age. My partner Wilson had but lately succeeded, on the death of his uncle, to a full share in the business, though he had been admitted to a junior partnership a short time before that event took place. He was a young man about nine years my junior, but showed a peculiar aptitude for business, being shrewd and clever, and having a confident air and good address that made him popular with our clients. But he was inclined from the first to mix in transactions of a bold and hazardous character, apart from our own legitimate business, and opposed to the general reputation which the firm had acquired for safe and cautious dealing. These ventures, however, I must admit, when any such were entered into, proved nearly always profitable; and I learnt to form a high opinion of my partner's business capacity, and at length left him too free a hand, perhaps, in the carrying out of his ideas. He acquired a leading position in the management of the firm, partly through his force of character and partly because at this time my family

affairs were the cause of grave anxiety to me, and prevented me from giving that close and continuous application to business which I otherwise should have given. I had only a few years previously been married to one whose memory even now shines like a line of sunshine through the gloom that has darkened my life, and whose unchanging love and devoted self-sacrifice were, under God, the means of preserving me from despair and from being dragged down to the foul level of my associates during the long and dreadful years of my bondage. The continual illness of our first child and its subsequent death had preyed upon my wife's health; and after our second was born—my daughter here, who since her mother's death has in love and devotion filled her mother's place as well as a daughter can—it was advised that in change of scene and travel she should seek a return to health. She spent some little time in the south of France, and then crossed over into Spain; and in accompanying her on her journeys, and in subsequent visits, I was a good deal away from home, throwing, in consequence, on my partner the chief control of the business. I had, however, implicit confidence in him; and in any investigations which I from time to time made into the firm's transactions and position, I found everything apparently satisfactory. Of Wilson's private life I must admit I knew but little. He was a bachelor, and did not keep up a house of his own. If I did receive hints once or twice of his gambling at the club or in connection with horseracing, these hints did not come to me from a quarter on which I could place much reliance, and I did not attach much importance to them, believing that, at the most, a friendly game of cards for a trifling stake may have occasionally been indulged in, or a pound or two invested on the Derby or Oaks. I was foolish, alas! and over-confident, and my folly came home to me, bringing ruin in its train.

“For some little time before the crash came, and while I

imagined all was well, the position of our firm was becoming deeply involved. Wilson's private losses must have been heavy ; and some speculative ventures, as I afterwards discovered, which he had undertaken on our joint account, had also proved failures at this time ; and to meet these losses he had converted to his own use, or to that of the firm, moneys which had been placed in our hands on trust. Just before the blow fell, securities, for dealing with which I, as senior partner, held power of attorney, were realised. My signature was forged. Nor was this all. Forged bills on a London house, with which we were in the habit of doing business, had also about this time been placed on the market and discounted. But Wilson must have been preparing for flight when these last acts were committed, for he took the proceeds with him when he went. The account books of the firm had been so manipulated and cooked as to deceive me ; and when I left Bristol for the purpose of bringing my wife and child back to England, I went away in happy ignorance of the malpractices which had been for some time carried on. Culpable I was, no doubt, in not making a stricter scrutiny into all the details of our business, but my suspicions had never been aroused : culpable, indeed, but not cognisant of my partner's felonious acts, much less criminally associated with him in any of them.

“A confidential clerk of ours, as it afterwards appeared, must have been acquainted in some degree with what was going on, and, if he was not an active accomplice in some of these nefarious doings, must have been bribed or terrorised into tacit acquiescence in them, and silence concerning them.

“When I took my departure on the occasion referred to, I left Wilson apparently as buoyant and self-confident as usual. He spoke hopefully of our prospects, and urged me not to hurry my return ; but, as he said with a laugh, which I afterwards learnt the import of, ‘Enjoy yourself for a week or two

in the sunny clime of Spain—the finest climate in the world, sir. I only wish I could join you there.' He was there first; or, rather, he reached that country, whereas my journey ended at Paris. I was detained a day or two in London, and then went on to Paris, taking with me, as it happened, a draft on the Bank of France for a considerable sum, to meet a payment falling due by us to a firm in that city. I reached Paris at night, and on the following morning I was arrested. The disclosure had come even sooner than Wilson anticipated. The day I left he had placed further forged bills on the market, but the signature to one of these had aroused suspicion, and discovery of enough to justify warrants of arrest being issued followed. As it was known that I had left with the avowed intention of going to Spain, the French police authorities were telegraphed to, with the result that I was arrested and detained, pending the arrival of the necessary warrant for my extradition to England. Wilson had been too much on the alert, and escaped. In fact, he must have had all his plans for flight arranged beforehand, for with all the plunder he could lay his hands on he left Liverpool, disguised as a Wesleyan minister, by a steamer direct for Barcelona, on the morning of the very day on which I left London. The clerk, mentioned, also disappeared at the same time.

"I at first looked on my arrest as the outcome of some ridiculous mistake, and telegraphed at once to Wilson and to our solicitors. From the former I, of course, got no reply, but that which I received from the latter caused me to take a more serious view of the situation, especially as it informed me that my partner could not be found.

"I still could not bring myself to believe him guilty of the crime with which we were charged, and hoped that all would yet be well. I chafed at each hour's delay that kept me in France, and was perversely anxious to be again in England, so that I might probe to the bottom the charges brought against me, and refute them, as I felt sure I should be able to do.

But when I arrived there, and realised the grave nature of these charges, and saw day by day further investigation unfold still blacker and more heinous pages of villainous fraud, and came to see also the toils and implications under which I had to struggle, I then felt in its full force the awful position in which I stood. God have mercy upon me, it was a fearful awakening! Why should I dwell upon the subsequent events—the trial, the evidence: the address of counsel, the verdict. It all comes before me now as clearly as if it had occurred but yesterday—each detail is burnt in upon my brain. My friends—I had still a few, a very few, who believed me innocent—and my counsel did all that could be done, but without avail. The forgery of my signature to the transfer of the trust securities had been so skilfully done, that even the cleverest expert was deceived. I had, indeed, been misled myself into signing one of them. In my hurry of departure from the office on one occasion, a document had been placed before me for signature, purporting to be the transfer to Wilson of a few shares held by me, whereas it was in reality the far more valuable securities of another.

“ My supposed flight, as it was called, into Spain, between which country and ours no extradition treaty existed, was also made to appear in its blackest aspect, especially as, when arrested, I had in my possession a considerable sum in drafts on the Bank of France.

“ My poor wife’s residence in Spain for the few previous months was also dwelt upon by the prosecuting counsel as being damning evidence of guilty preparation on my part. Some other circumstances, trifling in themselves, were also brought out as tending to throw discredit on my plea of innocence. Whether or not my partner had laid a snare for me in connection with one or two of these, I shall never now discover, but it appeared to me at the time to be not improbable that he had. He, to be sure, may have expected that I could have reached Spanish soil before the frauds were discovered; and had, indeed, urged me at last to hasten my departure.

Would to God I had reached Spain, for then I should at once have returned and faced the charges made against me ; and this, at least, would have shown that I had no desire to flee from justice, and might have turned the scale in my favour. However, the evidence against me was too strong, and I was found guilty and received a heavy sentence.

“ I had broken the news of my arrest gently to my wife, but not till after I had been brought back to England, making as light of the charge as I well could, and advising her to still remain in Spain, and await events. But she was with me in England as fast as express trains and night and day travelling could bring her.

“ ‘ My place, dear, is to be near you in trouble,’ she said, when I remonstrated with her for coming. ‘ The darker the hour of trial, the closer must affection cling. There is no blow so heavy but love can lighten it.’ And she kept her resolution to be near me. Through the dreadful ordeal of the trial I could look round and see in the court one face across which no shadow of doubt regarding my innocence ever passed, but whose smile of love and hope ever strove to cheer me. And when the verdict fell, and I bowed my head and thought of her only, I heard no tragic shriek, and there was no fainting away, but when I was led from the dock I looked up and saw, even then, struggling through her tears, a message sent to me of love and encouragement.

“ At the last sad meeting that was allowed us I was the weaker of the two.

“ ‘ You must bear up, for my sake,’ she said. ‘ The years will pass, and you will find me waiting for you when you are released, if God will spare my life till then.’ And then she unfolded to me her further plans. If I should be sent out to Western Australia, as was thought likely, it was her intention to follow me there. She had some little property of her own, settled upon herself, and this she purposed disposing of so as to be provided with means for the journey, and for maintaining

herself and our child in the distant colony. It was in vain that I tried to dissuade her from the course she had resolved to follow. I pointed out to her how much better it would be for her to still remain in England, where the sympathy of friends would in some degree lighten the affliction, and where time would pass less heavily for her than amongst strangers—coarse, unsympathetic strangers, most likely—in the far-off land. It was in vain, I say, that I reasoned thus.

“‘Where you go, there will I go,’ she said, with her arms thrown round my neck, just as the moment of parting drew near, her tearful eyes looking into mine, that were half blinded with the bitter grief. ‘Wherever you may be you will know that I am near you still—as near to you as I can, as near as they will allow me.

“Oh, God,” cried the old man, as the memory of the touching scene grew strong upon him, “Thy ways are past finding out. Thy hand has been laid heavily upon me in affliction, but the love of her thou gavest to me upheld me from going down into the pit.”

His daughter was much affected also, and even Ashwin rose from his seat and went to look out of the window for a moment, to hide the dew of sympathy in his eyes.

“Yes,” continued Elwood, “during the first months of my imprisonment while I was still in England, when the harsh and bitter experiences of my new existence were fresh to me, with its hard fare and harder toil—in the labour of the day, in the solitude of my cell at night—the remembrance of my wife’s devotion sustained me. And in the dreadful voyage out—never to be recalled without a shudder—when cooped up within the narrow confines of the crowded ship, without escape, day or night, from contact with all that was vilest in humanity—where foul obscenity was rampant, and whence I looked back on even the nightly cell of my previous prison-house, by contrast, as on a haven of rest—even there her presence seemed to be near me, and the vision of her sweet face shone

in upon my soul like an angel's, and lifted me out of the depth of degradation into which I otherwise should have sunk. And when at last the voyage, with all its horrors, was over, and we landed at Freemantle, first among the small crowd that watched us as we were marched off the wharf, it was my wife's face that I saw, full of yearning tenderness, that would have rushed to meet me, but was held back by the stern barrier of the law; for after we left she had taken the mail and had arrived a few weeks before us, and remained eagerly watching from day to day for the coming of the convict ship.

“It was long before we were granted the sad happiness—the sorrowful joy of an interview; but I knew she was always near me, and on many occasions I saw her, generally with our child in her arms or by her side.

“Years passed, and then I was allowed a restricted freedom on ‘ticket of leave,’ but was at first sent up country on a station. We met several times then, and could write to each other without restraint; and I need hardly say that we availed ourselves fully of the privilege. Subsequently I found employment near town, where I had the happiness of being near my wife and seeing her frequently. She had been provided by a friend in England with a letter to a gentleman of position in Perth, and by his advice had invested her capital in house property there. She herself lived in the outskirts, where she kept a school, teaching a few day scholars music and some of the higher branches of education. Though she was known as the wife of one of the convicts, yet her sweet face and amiable life made friends for her even there, and, joined with her skill as a teacher, brought her after a time a goodly number of pupils. She could have lived without teaching, as the income from her property would have been sufficient in itself to provide for her small expenses. But it was her great wish to increase her capital; and when I remonstrated with her on the toilsome life she led and on the strict frugality which she exercised, she would reply that, when the time came, we should

want something wherewith to make a new start in life. And when that time came and I could go where I would a free man, but with the brand of felony upon me, it was found that her investment had been a very profitable one, bringing in when realised enough to save our future from the prospect of want overtaking us, if due care were exercised.

“We left West Australia, and after some indecision as to whether or not we should remain in the Colonies, settled down in Victoria near the New South Wales border.

“I took my wife’s maiden name of Elwood; and here, on a few acres of land, in gardening and in the culture of the vine, in the sweet society of my wife and children—for, soon after our arrival there, our boy Edwin was born to us—I found solace for past hardships; and in the contentment of the home which she had provided, my wife found some reward for what she had undergone for me. We lived to ourselves and saw but little of our neighbours, content with the quiet happiness of our own home; and if we did not feel called upon to disclose the history of my past life, we were not painfully anxious that it should remain unrevealed. Though, indeed, as time passed, and I found myself further removed from the dark episode of my convict life, and looked back upon it across the later years of peace and happiness, I may at length have begun to be morbidly sensitive lest it should be made public, and desirous to blot out, if it were possible, the record from my mind. My wife was braver than I, and behind the shield of her unwavering faith in my innocence and of her high-souled devotion, she would have met the taunts and frowns of the world unmoved. The years went by happily in that new home, but, towards the last, not without apprehension, for my wife’s health declined. And when at last she lay down in mortal sickness and passed away, I felt that light had left the world. Willingly, most willingly, would I have given my life for hers—my miserable life that must drag on, carrying disgrace with it to all who are dear to me.

“After this I continued for some months to reside in the same place, but the home was cold and desolate to me, even though the mantle of my wife’s affectionate devotion descended on her daughter. And when one of the former associates of my convict days appeared there and recognised me, I fled from the place, no longer sustained, as I should have been had my wife been still alive, by the strong comfort of her presence. After several short residences in different places, we came here —still, even here, to be followed, as it seems, by the unsatisfied persecution of the past.”

CHAPTER XXIV

“I HAVE told you my story, Mr. Ashwin, for it was your due that I should do so,” Mr. Elwood (as we shall still call him) continued, after a pause. “Your kindness to me since I came here has been great, and can never be repaid. I do not now lay my past life before you from a desire to excite your sympathy, or create a belief in my innocence in your mind. I have no right to expect that you should be so influenced by the narrative; the ex-convict’s tale must always be received with doubt and suspicion. But you, amongst those whom we have met in this place, have seen most of us; you alone may be said to have associated with us in any degree; and some explanation of the scene you to-day witnessed, and of the words spoken of me, is due to you. The avowal should indeed perhaps have been made sooner—in confidence, to you. Had I carried out my daughter’s wish, expressed some little time since, the avowal would have been made; but I deferred doing so, or shrank from the ordeal. The exposure will now for a while afford talk for every idle tongue. The finger of reproach will be pointed at us by those who knew us not, and whom we never sought to know; and some of that reproach would be cast even on those who might be intimate with us. Therefore, while I thank you from my heart for all the help and advice that you have given me, and that I trust I have profited by, yet I would now, in all kindness, knowing more of the world’s ways than you do, ask you for your own sake to leave us to

ourselves—seeing just as little of us as it is possible for a neighbour to do."

"With your permission, sir," replied Ashwin, warmly, "I will do nothing of the kind. You have my heartfelt sympathy," he added, rising and giving the old man his hand. "I believe every word you have told me. You have been deeply wronged. Believing this I should be indeed a cur if I allowed the sneers or cold looks of others to influence me in my behaviour towards a man I felt for and esteemed. My disregard for the opinions of others, and my respect for you, ought to make me seek for and show a warmer friendship than before. I will take my leave now, but, if you will allow me, I will come over to-morrow and help to shift the ewes and lambs into the front paddock—they want a change now."

"Heaven bless you at any rate for your kindly sympathy," said Mr. Elwood, as he bade him good-bye; "but think better of associating with one who can only bring discredit on you."

Did the sweet face of Maud Elwood and her soft eyes, that unconsciously beamed approval on him when he spoke as he had done, have anything to do with the warmth of Ashwin's feelings towards her father, or with his desire for a closer intimacy? If they did he could hardly be oblivious of the difficulties of the position in which he would find himself. But he was of a frank, impulsive nature; and as he sat and listened to the father's story, and saw the daughter's face, beautiful in the affectionate regard and sympathetic concern with which she watched the old man as he told his tale of wrong and sorrow; as a new light was thrown on much that her words and manner had puzzled him in the past; and seeing her now as she truly was—a noble, unselfish woman—and lovely withal, his whole heart went out to her; and, regardless of consequences, of opposition, of the felon stain, he knew that he had found his fate, and that he could never love another as he now loved her. He had admired her

before—been “smitten” with her as young men will be with a pretty girl, but this was now something deeper, stronger, life-enduring.

He might never win her—probably would not ; she might go from here and be lost to him, and after years would no doubt bring other ties of love and affection—true affection and wedded happiness—but the fairest and purest temple in his heart would still be for her, and to the end he must continue in secret to worship there. But

“ ‘Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all,”

when that love is a pure and soul-elevating one, and Ashwin, as he took his leave, realised something of the truth of this, for he felt that it was better for him to have known and loved her, even though she should not be for him, than never to have known her. He was determined, however, to win her if he could.

Miss Elwood accompanied him to the front door, and, as he bade her good bye there, he said in a low voice :

“ I know now, Miss Elwood, why it was that you shrank from forming an intimacy with others—why you declined my sister’s visit—and much more that I failed to comprehend the motive for at the time. Though I may think you have been over-sensitive in this, yet I must respect you all the more for it. All I have listened to to-day has only made me think more highly of you in every way. You are too good for any you are likely to meet here. Even if your father had been guilty of the crime for which he suffered—and I believe him to be as innocent of it as I am—it would not, could not, lower you in my eyes. Good-bye,—I will not trust myself to say more now.”

“ Good-bye,” she said, with sadness in the look with which she met his eyes for a moment. “ We shall always remember your kindness ; but I can only say with my

father—and, oh, do not take it unkindly—it will be better for you—for all of us—if you leave us to ourselves."

"That I could not bring myself to do," Ashwin answered, and picking up his stockwhip from where he had thrown it, he hastily took his leave.

The boy, Ted, had been back on the farm during the time these events had been taking place, and when he returned his sister gently and lovingly gave him to understand, as well as he could, the nature of the cloud of shame and sorrow that lay upon their lives.

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. WILMOT was late in returning. Westall followed the road out for some distance past Elwood's, expecting to meet him. He passed Ashwin's place and gained the rise from which he and Davie had first caught sight of the wharé in which they had found lodging for the night.

This point commanded a good view of the road line beyond, and Westall seated himself on a log here, and waited.

The current of his thoughts led backward over the events of his past life—a wasted and useless life, he was forced to admit sadly to himself. Vain regrets over neglected opportunities, over-weak yielding to wrong-doing, took possession of his mind, mingled with doubly-saddening glimpses of what "might have been." The deep reverie into which he fell made him oblivious of the passage of time, or careless of it. Ashwin rode up as far as his own gate and passed in unnoticed, or apparently so. The harsh cry of the kaka as it flew from one block of bush to another before settling into its quarters for the night, or the soft, musical winging of the native pigeon, as it passed overhead, disturbed him not. It was only when the shadows began to close round him, and he heard M'Keown chopping up the night's firewood, whistling the while at intervals, or singing snatches of song, that Westall realised it would soon be dark, and he was some miles from the township. He started off, therefore, in that direction at a smart pace, having come to the conclusion that Wilmot must have returned by the other road, and that he would have to interview him at

the hotel that night or early on the following morning. He passed Elwood's again on the way back, and gained the metalled road abreast of Morton's place. It was now dark, and a light shone from the window of Morton's cottage as he passed, and between him and the light he thought he saw someone moving on the pathway outside. Westall pushed on at a brisk pace, for he was now beginning to feel hungry, and knew that he would be late for the evening meal at the Cosmopolitan. He had not, however, proceeded more than a few chains farther when he heard the sound of a horse coming at a sharp canter behind him, and a moment afterwards Wilmot rode up. He was a heavy man, and rode a powerful horse. Westall recognised him, but Wilmot would have ridden on had not the former called out.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Wilmot, as he drew up. "It must be something important that has kept you on the road to this hour. Well, I'm sorry I couldn't get back sooner, but the fact is I nearly forgot all about you, and I didn't expect you would be waiting so long here for me. Business must be attended to, you know; and if the day has been a long one, it has not been an unprofitable one. I sold a farm—and there's a good commission hanging on to that—besides looking after one or two other little matters that will bring in the guineas. But I should not, perhaps, tell you this, for I expect it's more money you're after."

"You're mistaken there," replied Westall. "I want no more of your money. I don't intend to touch it again."

Wilmot broke into scornful laugh. "Here's a reformation, to be sure," he said—"William Westall turning over a new leaf—the proffered sponduliks declined with thanks—no more whiskies or long beers either, I suppose—wine and woman alike eschewed—gad, they have ruined many a man—I have been too fond of them myself, perhaps. But out with it, man, there's something at the bottom of this sudden conversion of yours, I'll be bound. Like many a snivelling hypocrite, when

asked to do something not strictly puritanical, you would grow unctuous and holy all at once—the greater the sanctimoniousness, the higher the price, I suppose, as usual. But you needn't expect to play that game on me, d——n you!"

"Don't get your evil temper up, and I will tell you what I mean," replied the other. "The old man is here, as I told you last night. That is his place you passed just lately—Elwood is the name he goes by now. I saw him yesterday, and again to-day—changed so that I should not have known him, had not an old limb of the devil, a convict who served his time with him, recognised him as he was driving into the township. This wretch has been out here to-day to blackguard him, for he has some ill-will against him, and to-morrow everyone will talk of it."

"Let them talk," said Wilmot; "it will hurt neither you nor me, nor, for the matter of that, the old man himself. I expect he is not so squeamish by this time."

"And am I to stand by and see him, a man who never wronged anyone, held up to scorn and reproach?" Westall answered, with some show of manly spirit, "while you remain here honoured and respected. The cruel sufferings inflicted on him are not enough, but persecution must follow him and his family here—Not hurt him? Hurt or no hurt, I've made up my mind to tell all I know, in order to clear his name, as far as lies in my power. Brought face to face with him in this strange manner in this out-of-the-way place, I will keep silence no longer, even though I suffer for it. He was in Western Australia before I knew he had been arrested, or I might have spoken at the first."

"And who will believe you now if you do speak?" asked Wilmot, with rising anger. "The public-house loafer and companion of every low vagabond won't get much credence for anything he may say."

Westall felt the truth of the retort, but answered: "That may be very true, but other evidence might be forthcoming to

substantiate mine. I don't want to drag you under if I can help it, and I will do nothing openly in the matter for a month from now, so that you can get away if you don't like to run the risk of discovery. *You* could set his innocence beyond a doubt if you were brave enough to do it."

Wilmot listened to him with rising wrath. He had come to like his life here, and had attained to a position of respectability and importance. Must this be now forfeited, together with the prospect of the higher honour to which he aspired? Even if Westall should seek to screen him, and not make known his true name and history—and it was doubtful if he would do this—Wilmot felt that it would not be safe to remain here. Suspicion might be directed against him as having been connected in some way with Westall through his having supplied him with money, once the latter made himself known to Elwood and attempted to establish the old man's innocence. His old partner, Wilmot thought, might even recognise him, though this was hardly likely. But if Westall kept silence Elwood would probably part with his farm and leave the country, in order to free himself from the presence of his former convict associate and the consequent exposure.

These thoughts passing rapidly through Wilmot's mind, he suppressed his anger, and said: "The world is wide—let the old man seek fresh fields. There are plenty of places where he can spend the rest of his days in peace without fear of recognition, if he does not care to live on here. He is pretty well off, it seems, and can go where he likes. As for you, Westall, it's too late for you to do anything for him now. Leave him alone, and I don't mind doubling the allowance I have been giving you—provided, mind you, that you clear out of New Zealand. You know I was never stingy to a friend, though a man had better not make me his enemy. It's a little more money you have been trying for all this time, isn't it now?"

"No," Westall answered, firmly: "I have said I will not

touch your money again, though I starve. I will do all I yet can to clear my old master's reputation, to remove the stain from his name—late, all too late though it may be. My duty is clear, though I should be thrown into prison myself as your accomplice. I am determined, in any case, to rid my conscience of what has been lain on it too long."

"D——n you and your conscience!" cried Wilmot, in a passion. "I never knew a sneaking hound that was going to do a mean trick and round on one who had been his friend that didn't make a scapegoat of his conscience. I have dragged you out of the gutter more than once when I might have left you there to starve, and now you turn round on me with your conscience. D——n your conscience! If you won't take payment in the way I offered—take it in that shape." And, rising in his stirrups, overpowered with rage, he dealt Westall a murderous blow on the head with the heavy butt of the whip that he carried. He aimed a second blow, but his victim dropped before it fell; and Wilmot was about to spring from his saddle, with what purpose he himself, in his present state of mind, did not perhaps clearly comprehend, when the sound of footsteps hastily approaching brought him to a sense of his position, and, putting spurs to his horse, he galloped off in the darkness towards Bloomsbury.

When Wilmot arrived in the township he went straight to the police-station and laid an information, the purport of which will be gathered from the startling item of local news which appeared in the *Bloomsbury Guardian* of the following day under the heading

"DASTARDLY ATTEMPT AT STICKING-UP!"

"As our respected townsman, Mr. Wilmot, was riding home after dark yesterday evening by the Melton Road, when a few miles from this township, he was stopped and accosted by a man who made some enquiries as to the way and the distance to the nearest accommodation house. Mr. Wilmot gave the information wanted, and was about starting on again when the fellow suddenly seized hold of the horse's bridle, and, presenting a pistol at

the rider, demanded his money or his life. Our townsman, who generally carries a heavy riding-whip, nothing daunted, and without a moment's hesitation, struck the man over the head with it, and felled him to the ground. Mr. Wilmot would have dismounted and secured his assailant, and attended to his injuries, had not just then an accomplice of the first desperado rushed out from the side of the road ; and seeing that he had more than one villain to deal with, perhaps several, Mr. Wilmot, leaving the fellow where he fell, hastened into Bloomsbury and at once informed the police. Mr. Wilmot feared from the force with which he struck the man that the blow might have even proved fatal, and dreading this, or that serious injury had been inflicted, he, in company with our energetic police officer, Constable O'Flaherty, returned to the scene of the encounter the same night, but no trace of the fellow could be discovered. Further investigation this morning, however, found marks of blood at the spot indicated ; and on a track leading into the standing bush, which borders the road on one side at this place, further traces of blood were seen, clearly showing that the man must have made his way or been carried in that direction ; but careful search, continued to-day, has, up to the time of our going to press, failed to afford any clue to the whereabouts, dead or alive, of the would-be highwayman. Suspicion has fallen on a rather disreputable character who has been living at Mr. Brasch's *Cosmopolitan* Hotel for some months past, and who was observed during the afternoon near the scene of the outrage. Mr. Wilmot inclines to the opinion that it was this man who stopped him, though he was muffled up and disguised. It seems that the man has been in receipt of some small remittances through Mr. Wilmot, from friends at home, and that he knew of Mr. Wilmot's intention to travel yesterday by this road. What gives additional force to the suspicion is the fact that he did not return to the *Cosmopolitan* last night, nor has he yet returned. However, the event has no doubt been a lesson to the assailant, whoever he may have been, as we hope it will be to others of his class ; and we must compliment our worthy fellow-townsman on the pluck and courage he so signally displayed, and congratulate him on his escape in an encounter which might have had a serious termination for him, but for the ready exercise of these qualities."

Weeks passed, and still Westall did not return to the *Cosmopolitan* ; neither could any trace be found of Wilmot's "assailant," the supposed highwayman. The police had made enquiries in all directions after the culprit, who was thought to be hiding from justice ; if, indeed, he had not succumbed to the blow (as was deemed probable), and been quietly buried

by his “accomplices”: or had, himself, crawled into the adjoining bush, and in some of its tangled recesses lain down and died. The block of bush, which belonged to an absentee, contained two or three hundred acres, and though search had been made through it, it was felt that in its fallen timber, in its interwoven masses of undergrowth and vines, or in some of its hollow trees, the body of a man might be concealed till the startled bushfaller came upon the bleached bones, or the subsequent forest fire exposed the calcined remains to view.

Wilmot felt disquieted and anxious. He could not account satisfactorily to himself for Westall’s disappearance. Had he really wandered into the bush, weak and bleeding, to lie down in some concealed spot and die? This result would have been, for Wilmot, the least annoying termination of the affair; and though he may have felt some twinges of remorse for the homicidal blow which he dealt in his passion, yet in his secret soul he hoped that Westall’s tongue had been silenced for ever. One other apparent solution of the mystery had at first given him grave concern: Westall might have recovered sufficiently to have made his way back to Elwood’s, and making his identity known there, be lodged and shielded from observation till he was fit to charge Wilmot with the murderous assault, and to carry out also his intention of making his threatened disclosure. Wilmot could not share his suspicions with the police, for he intended, if the worst came, to put on a bold front, and deny all knowledge of the accusations that might be brought against him touching his past life. What reliance, he thought, would be placed on the testimony of Westall, himself accused of an attempt at highway robbery, even if the evidence of an ex-convict tended to corroborate it? If afterwards the aspect of things should take a more alarming turn, he still would have the resource of flight left; and even now he was beginning to make secret and skilful preparations for that eventuality.

The constable, it is true, had made enquiries from the

settlers on the road as to whether they had seen anything of the suspected individual, either before or after the time of the alleged sticking-up. Ashwin had seen him in the afternoon, going in the direction opposite to the township, and later, had again noticed, near his own place, the same man, as he thought, seated on a log; but since then had seen nothing of him. Morton had also noticed the man passing in the afternoon, "but did not think he looked much like a highwayman"; and wanted to know if the constable was certain that Wilmot was sober when he reached Bloomsbury.

"It is just possible," he said slowly to O'Flaherty, and with a satirical gleam in his eyes. "It is just possible that a man of fervid imagination, such as Wilmot may be, might—especially if he had a few whiskies aboard—have mistaken one of these black stumps on the road for a robber, and belaboured it over the crown, under the impression that he was killing a man. The strongest of us have hallucinations at times; and I don't believe there was any sticking-up at all."

"Lord save us," O'Flaherty said; "look at the blood we found on the road—wheriver now did that same come from if there was no stickin'-up?"

"Oh, the blood's nothing," answered Morton; "there was a fellow shooting pigeons in the bush during the afternoon—out of season you know, constable—and it may have been the blood of one of the birds you saw. No one, it seems, has seen anything of the wounded highwayman, and till he is produced, I won't believe that any attempt has been made on Mr. Wilmot's life or purse. The whole thing," he continued, with a laugh, "may have been got up in the interest of the local paper—in which Wilmot has a big share, I believe. When news is scarce and copy short, a startling incident like this is often manufactured. Look at the praises, too, that will be lavished on 'our respected townsman,' and the kudos he will get for his wonderful courage,—why,

Wilmot will be puffed out into bigger importance than ever. You're on the wrong track this time, constable, take my word for it."

"It's a funny man ye are, Mr. Morton, an' a quare one," replied the constable, as he rode away; and added to himself, "a bit gone in the upper storey yoursilf, I'm thinkin'."

Mr. Elwood, when asked, denied having seen anything of the suspected individual on the day in question, or since. But Wilmot's suspicions were not allayed till after he had taken means to have the young girl questioned who acted as servant at Elwood's, and whose parents resided in the township.

Upon her showing unmistakably that no one could be in hiding at Elwood's, and as the weeks went by and no tidings could be heard of the missing Westall, Wilmot was fain to believe that he had seen the last of him.

The sticking-up affair, which had been in everyone's mouth for a week or two, soon ceased to afford much interest, and became well-nigh forgotten. Morton, certainly, never lost an opportunity of referring to it when he met Wilmot.

He had been on another visit to Wellington a few days after the affair occurred, and subsequent to his return he seemed, contrary to his usual habit, to throw himself in Wilmot's way, and never failed to make some reference to the adventure—at one time, chaffing him in his keen satirical way over the cock-and-bull story, as he would call it; at another time, appearing to treat the affair in all seriousness, and making particular enquiry into each detail of it,—the height of the assailant, the kind of weapon, whether pistol or revolver, that he was armed with, what the fellow said, and so forth.

"We must be careful of ourselves in the future, Mr. Wilmot," he said on one occasion. "Evil characters are abroad, and honest men are scarce, therefore the few we

have ought to take extra care of themselves. I would go farther, and say that, in these days, when so many are advocating the extension of State interference and State protection in all sorts of new directions, it should be the peculiar duty of the State to look after its honest men more than it has hitherto done; and with that particular object in view, a Department might be formed whose officers would attend on and guard every honest man in the community. And," he continued, with a laugh, "even if a separate officer were detailed to wait on each honest man, I don't think the expense would be found very burdensome; though," he added, looking Wilmot full in the face, and bowing to him, "we should need one or two of these officers in Bloomsbury."

If Morton happened to be in the township after dark, he would then, if he saw Wilmot, solicit his company and protection home, expatiating on the extraordinary courage which he had displayed in his single-handed encounter with the highwayman. Wilmot was riled by all this, but could not well show open displeasure at it. He would try to pass it off in his high-handed, pompous way; but at length he began to hate the very sight of Morton, and to shun his presence when he possibly could.

CHAPTER XXVI

MEANWHILE rumour, with its hundred tongues, had got hold of Mr. Elwood's previous history, or that part of it which told of his having been a convicted felon. The crime for which he had suffered was variously given, with many circumstantial details, and ranged through the whole list of evil-doing, from murder to bigamy. It was the common topic for a while at hotel bars and afternoon teas ; and Frank Ashwin was soon made aware that gossip was busy with his neighbour's concerns and his own. He took occasion sometimes to contradict misstatements and exaggerations, and went so far as to avow his belief in the old man's entire innocence ; but he made no converts to his opinion, and was only ridiculed for it behind his back. It was hinted, with many a laugh and wink, that the beauty of the daughter had blinded the young man's eyes to the character of the father. Miss Elwood, when she rode into the township with her brother (for the disclosure made no difference in her manner of life), was for a time the observed of all eyes, and many a comment in her praise or disparagement did her appearance give rise to.

Rumour flies fast, and it was only about ten days after Old Dan's recognition of his former fellow-convict that Ashwin got the following letter from his sister Laura :

" HAREFIELD.

" DEAR FRANK.—You will trust a woman's intuitive perception next time, I think. I *felt* and *knew* that there was something wrong with those people who lately settled near you ; and now you must admit I was right, though I never for a moment imagined they were anything so *dreadful* as

they now are shown to be. Fancy such horrid criminals coming to live in a decent neighbourhood and palming themselves off for respectable people. I really think such a thing ought not to be allowed, or, at least, made punishable by the law when found out. You will of course never see anything of them after this *esclandre*, but it is not pleasant to have this class of persons living near one—I should resent it, I know.

“And now to pleasanter topics. The hunt club ball was a great success in every way, and passed off splendidly. I enjoyed myself *immensely*, and so I think did Kate. I will not give you any description of the dresses, because it would not interest you if I did. There were, of course, one or two that were simply *hideous*, and two or three decent dresses that were spoiled by the *figures they were on*. *Ours* were said to be very becoming. This, I know, you would have taken for granted, for you have found out before now that your sisters have at least good taste—*cela va sans dire*. Tom was there, of course, and danced most of the evening with Eva Markham. Do not be surprised if you hear of your brother’s engagement in that quarter. Why ever did you not come, Frank? We are all so disappointed, and none more so, I think, than Milly Parsons, for though she had plenty of partners, I don’t believe she enjoyed the dance a bit—certainly not like she did the last, when you were there. She looked as nice as any girl in the room, too, but seemed to have lost her usual *verve* and buoyancy of spirits. Ah, Frank, if you had been there I fancy she would have found them. Young Dalton was of course very attentive to her as usual, and, you know, persistency will often win the day. But seriously speaking, Frank, she is one of the nicest girls in the district, and I believe if you would make up your mind to win her you would succeed. If you didn’t you would be at liberty to say that your sister was possessed of no discernment. But, of course, you don’t want to let the grass grow under your feet, or lose any time in this matter, for Milly is a girl that will have plenty of offers. Her father is pretty well off, as you know, and there will therefore be something considerable in the way of *dot*, and this ought not to be despised by a young man starting on a new place. The family is a very good one, also ; at least, on her mother’s side, for she is, I believe, a relative of Lord Corduroys—so that there is nothing objectionable on that score. Think it over, my dear Frank ; get a decent house up, and I don’t think Milly will object to grace it for you, even though it is in the bush with few nice people near. By the way, I met a Bloomsbury acquaintance of yours at the ball, a Mr. Ponsonby, who, I understand, has been residing there for some time and is on the look out for a *large property*. He seems very nice, and, judging by his conversation, must be very well connected at home. I will not say that he has paid me any particular attention, but I had three or four dances with him and, he dances *exquisitely*. He says he knows you slightly, and really,

Frank, this is a class of acquaintance that I should like you to cultivate more. I am afraid you are inclined to be rather free with your friendship, and not careful enough in selecting your associates. You won't be angry with me I know for writing to you in this strain, for though I am several years younger than you, still women arrive at mature judgment in these matters sooner than men, and have keener perceptions to what is proper and fitting—in fact, most men remain the veriest infants in this respect to the day of their death. The unfortunate acquaintance, however slight, that you formed with those dreadful people near you should be a lesson to you for the future. You are apt also, I think, to make too much of a companion of your man, M'Keown, or whatever his outlandish name is; but, of course, living together as you do in that wretched little wharé, it is not easy perhaps to keep him in his place. Cultivate the society of Mr. Ponsonby and gentlemen of his stamp. A little more *haut ton* in your manner would improve you. And now, dear Frank, I expect you are tired of my lecture, and are calling me a professor in petticoats (as you did once before) or some other nasty name; but then, you know, I am actuated only by sisterly friendship in the advice that I have given you, and '*Il faut de ses amis endurer quelque chose*,' as Moliere, I think it is, says. And really, Frank, if I didn't give you some good advice now and then on the subject, I don't know who is likely to do so, for mother is too placid and easy-going to take the trouble, and Kate, perhaps, is not particular enough herself in the choice of her friends. But I have done. Don't let me frighten you from coming to see us soon. I will promise not to say another disagreeable word or lecture you on any subject when you come. Milly, I expect, will be staying with us the week after next, so try to give us a few days of your society then.

"Jack Rutledge's horse came down with him lately, and Jack is cut about the face, and looks *dreadful*.

"The pater is well, but in a bad humour over his last returns of frozen mutton. I wanted to have a 'hop' here shortly, but am afraid to ask for it in his present mood. Kate would also like to see you soon, and sends her love—Mother, also, and she wishes me to say that she has made you some under-flannels, and will send them first opportunity.

"Ever, dear Frank,

"Your affectionate sister,

"LAURA."

"P.S.—I suppose those wretched people will leave now that their true character is known."

Ashwin read this letter with feelings of anything but

pleasure, and the comments he made were not complimentary to his sister.

“Weak and shallow,” he said, when he had finished, “and impressed only with the outside show of things, like most women, I am afraid—bitter and unreasonable in their prejudices, and cruel in their hates.” But here Ashwin stopped short, and, breaking into a laugh, said: “Why, I’ll be as great a misanthrope and woman-hater as Morton if I go on like this; I must have been too much in his company lately. This will never do. Laura’s right enough, only just a bit too much taken up with the trumpery vanities and superficial fripperies of her much-valued society. It’s a blessing that all women are not so. Ah, Maud! sweet Maud Elwood! how few of your own sex can value you at your true worth! ‘Horrid criminals’ and ‘dreadful people,’ indeed. Convict’s daughter though you be, you are worth a hundred thousand such heartless creatures as—but, there, I’m off again, railing at women, after Morton’s fashion. The man’s a fool that tries to interpret the motives, or find consistency in the conduct, of most of them. Laura is evidently still a little anxious about me and the state of my feelings towards Miss Elwood, and shows sisterly concern in trying to lead me away from danger, as she deems it. The position is a trying one for me, and will be beset with difficulties; but they have got to be faced. The course of true love may never run smooth, but it also cannot very well be dammed up or turned aside. Even with the criminal stain upon her, and her father guilty, the girl I love would be good enough for me—too good she is—though my people and their friends mightn’t think so—too good for Laura and her set; and I would write and tell them so if I had good hopes of winning her, but that, I am afraid, will not be an easy task.

“Laura lectures me soundly (I don’t envy her husband, if she ever gets one), and lauds me with ‘good advice’—Ponsonby held up as a model to be imitated—ha, ha, ha! If she knew him as well as I do, I don’t believe she would think him such

a paragon. I hope pretty Mary Robinson isn't going to be led into any indiscretion through him, but from what Spalding says, Ponsonby is evidently sweet on her, and will try to make her acquaintance if he can. His attentions could only mean mischief, but I think Mary has more sense than to listen to the fellow, and if Mr. Ponsonby isn't careful he'll get the conceit shaken out of him in a way that will astonish him some of these days."

Ashwin did not pay the visit to his father's place just then which his sister asked him to make. Busy at the time with his sheep, and in preparations for shearing, he made this his excuse for deferring it; but he really was averse, in his present state of mind, to meeting his sisters or their expected visitor. He found occasion, however, to make several calls on his neighbour, and was received by Mr. Elwood with his usual courtesy. The old man had, indeed, again, in his gentle way, remonstrated with him for seeking to continue the intimacy, but afterwards, seeing that remonstrance was of no avail, and feeling grateful for Ashwin's unchecked friendship, he showed plainly the pleasure which these visits afforded him. His daughter was perhaps a little more reserved in her manner than before, and seemed disinclined to give Ashwin an opportunity of speaking with her alone. He indeed saw but little of her at home; but in the rides to the township in company with her brother, which Miss Elwood sometimes found it necessary to take, it was not at all extraordinary if Ashwin overtook them on the way.

Miss Elwood once or twice rode in alone, when the boy for some reason was prevented from accompanying her, for she was now a fairly capable horsewoman and felt at home in the saddle.

It was on one of these occasions that, riding homeward at an easy pace which just suited Bob's sluggish disposition, she was overtaken by Ashwin, while still not far from Bloomsbury. She had recognised his horse's long swinging canter before he

came quite up, and had urged her own horse forward. But her companion, as soon as he joined her, seemed disinclined for further fast travelling ; and she was compelled to allow Bob to again drop into a walk.

Whether it was that after the first greeting there was any constraint noticeable in the young man's voice and conversation, or whether it is that a woman, when an avowal of love is about to be made to her, has, as a rule, some subtle discernment and foreknowledge of its approach, or whether a man at such a time, even to ordinary observation, looks and behaves in a manner more than usually foolish, it were idle to discuss ; but Miss Elwood felt before she had been many minutes in Ashwin's company that he was about to make some embarrassing declaration of the kind ; and could she have exchanged horses with her companion, it is to be feared that poor Frank would have been left to make it to the wind, for the desire was strong within her to escape and hurry homeward with all speed. As it was, she made an effort to again get her horse into a canter, but as the attempt was not seconded by any increase of speed on the part of the one Ashwin was riding, Bob positively declined to go forward, for he had a rooted and grounded objection to parting company with any of his species with which he had foregathered on a journey, when that parting meant an increase of speed on his part. It would, at least, have required a more vigorous application of the whip to induce him to do so than Miss Elwood cared to exercise.

Making love, or a declaration of love, on horseback, it has been said by someone, is attended with some difficulties ; yet such is the perversity of young people in unnecessarily facing these, that it is pretty certain, in the colonies at least, a good deal of love-making takes place there—and first avowals of love also. There is often an unsteadiness, a want of continuity, about the proceeding which is tantalising. The horses nearly always fail to enter into the spirit of the thing. One or other of them may stop at perhaps a critical moment, or turn aside to

crop a tempting mouthful of grass, the riders, of course, having for the time being lost all control over the reins. While if the consummation of a kiss is desired, the attempt is often, in a ludicrous way, attended with partial or complete failure. But practice in this, as in other feats, will generally make the thing easy of accomplishment, and it is wonderful what adepts some engaged couples become at bringing their lips together under the trying circumstances.

“Shall we canter a bit?” said Miss Elwood. “My horse does not seem inclined to go on alone.”

“I must be thankful to him on this occasion,” Ashwin replied with some hesitation; “for indeed—indeed, Miss Elwood, I want to speak to you—I have something to say to you—something that I have lately been very anxious that you should listen to, but that I have not had the opportunity before to tell you.” And Ashwin told his tale—how he had admired her the first time he saw her; how further acquaintance had strengthened his feelings of admiration and regard: how the disclosures relative to her father’s past life, and the recital of his unhappy history, had only resulted in placing her character and worth in a truer, higher and purer light before him, and in making her immeasurably dear to him—that he loved her now with the whole strength of his nature as he never could love another; and ended by asking that she would not deny him some little gleam of hope that he might yet win her love and make her his wife, or at least grant him the privilege of trying to do so.

Miss Elwood was much affected by the avowal. The warm blushes that overspread her face when he first began to speak soon vanished; and it was with a paler cheek than usual, and in a voice of deep feeling, not untinged with sorrow, that she answered him:

“Mr. Ashwin, I am sorry, deeply sorry—you should have saved yourself and me from this, for what you ask for is impossible—it is indeed. I could not be your wife. I will

not say that your avowal of love for me has not deeply affected me, or that it does not do you honour—foolish and blameable though it might appear in the eyes of the world ; and much as I regret that it has been made—for it proves, what indeed you have shown before, that you possess a generous nature. But, indeed, what you ask can never be—it never could, even if—if I cared for you. My place is with my father and my brother, and I shall never marry. I can not be your wife, but neither shall I be the wife of any other."

"I know why this is," he answered ; "but is it right? Why should you care for the opinions of others that are not worthy of a thought from you? I hold them in scorn. Even if your father had been guilty—and you know I believe him to be innocent, and deeply wronged—it would not lessen my love for you. I love you for yourself alone—your own true, noble, sweet self. Ah, Maud—Miss Elwood—have pity on me and give me some hope. We can leave this place if you do not care to remain here. There are other countries than New Zealand, with brighter skies, perhaps, and better openings for the exercise of brain and muscle. I am not bound to it ; and I would pass my life in a desert with you, rather than in the fairest spot on earth without you."

"This is folly," Miss Elwood replied, "great folly ; and in kindness to yourself and—and to me say no more, I beseech you, Mr. Ashwin. This infatuation may have taken strong hold of you for the moment, and you may think your feelings will undergo no change, but time and sober reflection will show you the folly of this. Even if—if I cared well enough for you, and yielded to your wishes—which, believe me, is not to be thought of—after years might bring to you something of regret, and the unwisdom of the step you had taken might be made apparent to you when it was too late."

"That could never be," Ashwin cried ; and, bending over towards her, he continued, with the warmth of deep passion in his voice : "Oh, Maud, my heart's delight, truest and best of

women, give me leave to win you. This infatuation, as you call it, has not come upon me suddenly, nor will it ever leave me. It is interwoven with my very life. I can read my own heart, and know the undying love it bears to you. Give it some reward. Your father would not withhold his consent. Bid me wait—for years if you will—but do not, beloved one, tell me to abandon all hope."

Miss Elwood was moved, in spite of herself, by the vehemence of her lover.

"For pity's sake forbear," she said. "I will not listen to you. What you ask for I cannot grant. If you have any regard for me you will be silent on this subject, and never speak of it to me again. It would pain my father also if he knew of this. We are nearly home now," she added, and urged Bob into a canter, for that steed was not so disinclined for a spurt when he knew that it must terminate in a short distance at his own gate.

Ashwin opened the gate for her, and took leave of her there.

"I can always have the sorrowful satisfaction of loving you," he said as he parted from her.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MORTON had seen them as they passed his place, though in the absorbing nature of their occupation at the time, they had been unconscious of his presence near them. As he watched them go slowly by, deeply interested, as it appeared, in conversation, he laughed to himself, but his laugh was less bitter and cynical than usual. It had more of human kindness in it.

"Ah, well," he said, "we shall see. I believe they are deserving of happiness—both of them—if they can find it—as much happiness as falls to the lot of poor humanity. To love and be beloved again, and think life an elysium till the illusion is swept away. Never mind, we must each live our life and die our death. Be happy if you can. Ashwin is in love, poor fool—I can see that plainly—and with no encouragement for him in his suit—none at all. Heart-aches have begun. Well, we shall see—perhaps there is hope for him yet. Ashwin, for a young colonial, is a fine fellow as men go, and I like him. He can use a stock-whip—ha, ha, ha!—and yet has got a soul above bullocks. And the girl is one in ten thousand, I have come to think—and may be a fool for thinking so. She is not, at any rate, one of those mincing, mindless things that one meets with every day; nor one of the back-biting, scandal-scattering, blood-sucking, venomous sort: nor yet is she one of the wheedling, coaxing harlots of hell," he exclaimed, as some strong memory rushed upon him; and then he added, bitterly, "Time has not quite healed that

sore yet. The foul and festering cancer is not yet wholly burnt out. Ah, well," he went on, after a pause, "this girl, I think, is cast in a different mould from any of these, and may be worthy of a true man's love—and may yet be able to reward it."

The same evening, as Miss Elwood was seated beside her father, her brother having gone to bed, she said, after some little hesitation :

"Father, I have been thinking it might be better for us—for you—and all of us—if we left this place—left it at once—as soon as possible. The farm could be sold again without a loss I suppose? We could return to England, or, if you should prefer it, live in some quiet spot on the Continent—in France or Germany. Living is cheap there, and I could, by teaching English, or in some other way, help to add to the little income we might otherwise have."

The old man looked at her for a moment before he answered, and she blushed a little under his gaze.

"Perhaps you are right, dear," he said. "But not to England—not again to England—anywhere else, but not again there. I did think we had found a haven here; and, if you had wished it, I could, perhaps, have borne to remain here. But if you are not happy in this place—if you think you would be happier elsewhere—it is better that we should go. Our paths must again be with those of 'the wandering foot and weary breast.' Yes, it is best that we should leave. I, myself, have no longer a desire to stay here; and your happiness, dear, and your own good, and Edwin's, must now be all I have to live for. And I have noticed you less bright and cheerful of late, when you thought you were unobserved—as if some fresh sorrow had found you—you who were always so brave and comforting. Traces of tears this afternoon I thought I saw also. Ah, Maud, what would I do if my staff and stay failed me! Yes, we will sell the place, and seek fresh scenes. The farm is yours and your brother's—in your name, and in

yours and mine, as trustees for him. There will be no difficulty in disposing of it, and no loss—if I have been correctly informed by those who ought to know its value—and there may be a profit. Yes, dear, we will sell out here, and go where you think best."

Accordingly, a few days afterwards the farm was advertised for sale in the local paper, and was also placed in the hands of the Wellington firm of land agents, through whom it had been purchased by Mr. Elwood. And, will it be credited, before another few days had passed, Frank Ashwin, like the great and irresponsible simpleton that he was, put his farm in the market also.

He had seen Mr. Elwood's advertisement the day after it appeared, and had called on him at once. He was then told of the determination to leave New Zealand that had been come to.

"It is my daughter's wish as much as mine—more so, indeed," the old man said. "I could have been content to live on here, for a time at least. But it was her wish, expressed lately, that we should go at once. And it is better so. She has hardly been her usual self since that day of the encounter, when you came so timely to our assistance; and the desire to sever our connection with the place seems to have since grown upon her—her who was wont to be so brave, and unmindful of the world's opinion, its slights, or its scorn. I can hardly understand it, but it is wisest that we should leave, and," he added, "we can, however, always look back with pleasure and grateful feelings to one bright circumstance in our life here, in that we found a true friend in you, Mr. Ashwin—and, indeed, in a less degree, in Mr. Morton also; for since that day we have seen more of him than we did before, and though his mind may be prejudiced in some respects, and his words often hard and cynical, yet I believe he has a warm heart; and he has lately shown a gentle consideration and kindly feeling, which, I will admit, I hardly expected from him. But you

have been our friend from the first—a true, unchanging friend throughout."

Ashwin could only murmur his regrets at the proposed departure, for his heart was too full to allow him to express himself freely. But, before he left, when he had an opportunity of speaking with Miss Elwood alone for a moment, he told her he would leave also.

"I would follow you to the ends of the earth," he said, "if you would not shut me out from all hope: but, in any case, I cannot stay here. When you have gone, how could I look day after day on the place where you have been, and no longer are? The very sunshine would be blighted. I also will go, and seek relief in change of scene—in South Africa or the Argentine."

"Stay here—stay here," she said. "Oh, that I should be the means of driving you from your home and friends! It is hard, but you are wrong and foolish—believe me you are. Stay here. Time will bring its cure, and you will forget me—not altogether forget, perhaps, but look back with only a feeling of friendly regard for one whom you will see no more: as—as, indeed, I shall always look on you. And you will find another to fill more worthily the place in your heart and life that you now think is reserved only for me."

"Never," he said; "believe me—never. You shall still have the first and only place there. Ah, Miss Elwood, is it not cruel? Were it not for this barrier that you have raised between us—needlessly, I think—my heart tells me I might hope in time to win your love. Give me leave to come to you, wherever you may be—a year hence—ten years hence—and I will come."

"It cannot be—oh, it cannot be," she answered with some emotion, touched by the strength and fervour of his love. "What can I say more? Let no false hopes delude you. See me no more—speak to me no more, for pity's sake. Oh, that we were leaving this place this very hour," she added, as if to herself.

"Remain here," Ashwin replied, "and I will go—my presence shall no longer give you pain. I will accept the inevitable. I have been wrong, I suppose, in urging my suit so strongly—but my love is strong."

And they parted.

And thus it was that Ashwin's place was put in the market also. He placed it in Wilmot's hands for sale privately. Elwood had not given his farm into that gentleman's hands for disposal, for, in fact, he was hardly aware of his existence, or that there were agents in the township for the sale of property. But, now that his own farm was advertised in the *Guardian*, he noticed there also the list of properties which Wilmot had for sale, and it is possible he might have given him also the opportunity of finding a buyer for it if he could, had not Morton, on the evening of the day of Ashwin's last visit to Elwood's, walked over there. He had called there several times lately on matters of neighbourly business or friendship, and on this occasion he gave as the reason for his visit the advertisement which he had seen with reference to the sale of the farm, and said he wished to have a talk with Mr. Elwood on the subject. The result of the interview was the withdrawal of the advertisement from the paper, and a notification forwarded to the Wellington agents that, for the present at least, the property was no longer for sale.

When Ashwin learnt of this sudden change of intention, he did not know what to make of it, but was inclined to think sorrowfully that it must have been brought about by his own determination to leave the district, as expressed to Miss Elwood, whose influence over her father he knew to be paramount. But when he next met that young lady as she rode into Bloomsbury with her brother, something, as he fondly imagined—indescribable perhaps—but still something—in her manner, as she returned his greeting, caused him to take a less gloomy view. Was it a deeper blush that overspread her

features, or was it a softer look in the eyes that were raised for a moment to meet his?

Whatever it may have been, Ashwin pursued his way homeward with a less heavy weight on his heart, and he felt that, while Miss Elwood remained in the district, it would be impossible for him to tear himself away from it. The very next morning, therefore, he went in and saw Wilmot, and, if he did not actually withdraw his farm from sale, he added two pounds an acre to the price of it, much to the chagrin of Wilmot, who thought he could have sold it readily at the price first asked for it.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MEANWHILE, Maurice M'Keown's love affair could hardly be said to be getting much "forrader," though nothing had actually occurred to interrupt the course of it. He was as devoted as ever in his attentions to the fair Mary, and some evening in the week, or on Sunday, he was sure to find his way across the paddocks to Robinson's.

A gloom had, of course, been thrown over the family by the tragic death of poor Harry, but he had been virtually a stranger to all the younger members of it, and with them the loss did not lie heavily on the heart as it did with his mother. The memory of that loss was rarely absent for long from her mind, though she bore it in a chastened and resigned way, without allowing it to cloud the serenity with which she carried out the duties of her life. Robinson may have felt the death of his son a good deal also, but he rarely referred to it, and in the bustling routine of his work on the farm, he found full occupation for mind as well as body.

Bereavement lies lightly on youth. Its buoyancy and bright outlook of hope are seldom dimmed for long, and the children, including Mary, when a few weeks had gone by, ceased to be affected by the sad episode in their lives.

Mary was young, and though Maurice made love to her in his hot, impetuous way, and now that he had entered on the business, would have carried her heart by storm, despising the slow tactics of a prolonged siege, Mary had not, so far, shown any desire to capitulate outright. It is true she had

accepted him as a lover, had taken her walks with him, and had listened with a pleased ear to his blandishments and strongly expressed declarations of love. She had even permitted him occasionally to take the sweet reward of a kiss—or, at least, had offered no very desperate resistance when he made the attempt. She had, in fact, made up her mind to marry him, and would have been much cast down and heart-broken if Maurice had transferred his affections and attentions to any other girl, but when he spoke of marriage or plighted troth, she would laughingly evade any direct committal for herself. Mary felt quite sure of his love, and was, perhaps, inclined in consequence to keep her lover in some degree of uncertainty with regard to the true state of her own heart.

Old professors in the art of love-making say that a man is foolish to appear hopelessly and helplessly over head and ears immersed in the tender passion, if he is not prepared, then and there, to offer his hand and a home as well as his heart, and Maurice was hardly as yet in a position to do this. He looked forward to a home in a year or two on that bush section of his where he had made a start at clearing—a home in which, to his mind's eye in fond anticipation, everything would be lit up with the sunshine of Mary's presence ; but till then he must be content with the happiness of preparing it for her—and her for it.

Mary was young, and in the first fresh joy of womanhood was not anxious to bind herself with any engagement, preferring the delights of untrammelled freedom for a little longer, and as yet not willing to forego that added zest to existence which a young girl naturally experiences when she feels that she can be the object of the admiration of young men, without that admiration being damped by the knowledge that she is the marked and labelled property of another. When she is two or three years older that zest has lost its flavour, and it is then that the engaged girl, in her new dignity and assured matri-

monial prospects, feels she is the envy of her less fortunate sisters, and a new zest is given to her life.

Big George had paid the Robinsons two or three visits since Harry's death, and in his bashful way had shown the interest with which he regarded Mary; but he had not plucked up courage to make any decided advances. Mary must have been conscious in some degree of the state of his feelings towards her. But she was not a flirt, and could hardly be said to have offered him any encouragement, save in the kindness which she, in common with the others, showed to Harry's trusted mate.

George himself judged pretty correctly how matters stood between her and Maurice, and he came to think that he had been too late in entering the field. He and his mates had taken a contract in another part of the district, and the Robinsons had not seen him for some little time lately.

Mary had another admirer, but of a different sort, in the person of Mr. Ponsonby, resident at the Criterion Hotel, in Bloomsbury. He had seen her in the township on several occasions, and had been struck with her bright, good looks, her springy step, and lishesome, yet well-rounded, figure.

"A perfect paragon of rustic loveliness, by jove," he said to himself, as he watched her with unrestrained admiration. "'She walks in beauty,' egad—though there's nothing 'dark,' but something 'bright,' about her."

He was enamoured of her, and determined to enliven the dulness of his Bloomsbury existence with a little harmless, or harmful, love making—harmless for him, while harmful for her, might, perhaps, best express his aspirations.

He took occasion, therefore, to follow her as she returned from the township, or to throw himself in her way, and offered in his best grace and most gallant manner to carry her small parcels for her, as he was going (as he said) in the same direction himself. But this offer Mary firmly declined.

Mary, if inexperienced, was circumspect and scrupulous

enough in her conduct ; but what could she do when a young man, walking her way, would persist in keeping by her side and chatting in a respectful way about matters of local interest. She did not wish to be rude, and must answer him sometimes. He encountered her in this way more than once, and began to use soft flattery, and pay, as he thought, most telling compliments, with hints of love, and heartaches, and what not ; and talked of Cupid and Venus, and quoted amatory verses ; and spoke of himself, his high connections and expectations. But Mary, though no doubt flattered in some degree by the evident admiration with which this fine gentleman regarded her, felt that his persistent attentions, and the increasing warmth of them, were becoming compromising to her ; and plainly showed, could his vanity have allowed him to see it, that she was not desirous of his company—that it was distasteful to her.

And when at last, at a secluded part of the road, he made some attempt to kiss her, she flamed up in hot indignation, and told him to leave her, and not force his society on her for the future, he was fain to comply with the demand in as far as it related to the particular moment, especially as, just then, some rider was seen approaching in the distance.

Ponsonby returned towards Bloomsbury.

“One refusal, no rebuff,” he said to himself. “She doesn’t mean half of what she makes believe—none of them do. Egad, I like to see them show some spirit at first—take some winning—and not drop into a fellow’s arms at the first invitation. She’s a deuced tempting piece of goods, though ; and when she’s angry, or tries to appear angry, looks more captivating than ever. Venus in a huff, or with Juno’s frown taken on for a change—or, egad, the virtuous Diana herself, ‘chaste and fair,’ in a bit of a temper. Well, my beauty, it’s to be hoped you’ll be in a more melting mood—just a little—the next time we meet—as I have no doubt you will.”

Maurice had heard of Ponsonby having been seen walking with Mary, and was vexed and annoyed at it.

"I could trust Mary far enough to take care of herself, for the matter of that," he thought, "but no woman's head is quite proof against vanity, perhaps—and this fine lover may turn hers—and the old sweetheart may not look so worthy beside this gay gentleman, as I suppose he calls himself. It's not pleasant, at any rate, to have her name mentioned along with his. His intentions can hardly be honest, and, by heavens, he had better take care what he's about!"

He spoke to Mary, also, on the matter, but she laughed and made light of it.

"I can't help the fellow walking in the same direction as I'm going--as he has done once or twice—and speaking to me," she said, and added, laughingly, "but you needn't be jealous of him, Maurice,—you really need not—though he is such a swell. But I don't think he will trouble me again—or you, Maurice,—poor old Maurice, getting jealous—for I told him pretty plainly last time I saw him I didn't want his company."

"Jealous," replied Maurice, "of course I'm jealous. You're so sweet-looking and pretty that everyone must admire you; and, of course, I can't help being jealous. But promise to be mine, darling, and I'll never be jealous any more. I could trust you, Mary, then. And when it was known that you were the promised wife of another, fellows of this Ponsonby sort might admire you from a respectable distance, but would cease to annoy you—and insult you—with their attentions, or if they didn't I would make them. Give me the right to protect you, Mary, darling."

Mary felt very much inclined to surrender at discretion, but stood out for further parley.

"I'll think it over, Maurice—seriously, I will," she said; "but I know you would protect me, right or no right, if I needed protection. I can take care of myself pretty well, too,

believe me. But the next time I have to walk in to Bloomsbury I'll time it—just to please you—so as to come back with Billy, when he gets out of school."

And on her next visit to the township she felt, in returning under Billy's protection, that she was quite safe and could bid defiance to the wiles of the enemy; and, though she caught sight of Mr. Ponsonby in the street, she reached home without seeing anything further of him.

Some weeks elapsed before Mary again walked thither; and then, on some errand of importance, she went in alone one Saturday afternoon.

Lengthening days and warmer weather told of summer being at hand. The season promised to be a dry one, and the roads and bush tracks, even the worst of them, now afforded pleasant travelling. The growth of grass on the sides of the roads was such as to almost cover the smaller logs that lay there; and in most of the paddocks the stock were half hidden in the luxuriant feed. Those bush pests—the mosquitos—were becoming troublesome in the evenings after the sun went down. They had been bad in the standing bush for a month or more, but had lately extended the sphere of their operations to the adjoining cleared and open ground, much to the annoyance of the settlers, especially of those new-comers who for the first time made their acquaintance.

Ponsonby had seen Mary enter the township; and, bent on again encountering her, he strolled off in the direction which she must take, so as to wait for and intercept her on her way home.

Mary was rather later than she had expected to be, and was tripping along smartly so that she might reach home before dark, and when about half way became aware of Mr. Ponsonby's presence on the road in front of her. He was waiting, and she must needs pass him. He lifted his hat and accosted her. He may have had an extra beer or two in the afternoon, and was very demonstrative.

"How do you do, Miss Robinson?" he said, as he proceeded to walk by her side. "'Pon my soul, I was beginning to think I should never again have the supreme delight of feasting my eyes on your loveliness—'pon my honour I was; and this is a happy meeting for me."

Mary was walking faster than before.

"The meeting's not a pleasant one for me," she said, "and I will thank you if you will turn back. I expect my brother, or somebody else, to meet me, and I have no wish for your company."

"There's not a soul in sight," said Ponsonby, looking ahead. "I shall walk home with you, myself, if you will allow your slave that pleasure. Perhaps it's the rustic lover we expect, eh? Well, he has broken his tryst, you see—he doesn't keep faith. Ah, Miss Robinson, take a gentleman for your lover—you're worthy to be a Countess, egad—you are formed for love and love's delights, and not to be the drudge of some beggarly bushman who couldn't love and prize you as I should."

Mary walked on without replying.

"Egad, you can step out, and no mistake. Don't be in such a hurry, my princess. Give a fellow breathing time when he wants to relieve his mind and take the weight off his heart. This is too doosid hurried, you know."

They had now reached a spot on the road where several large trunks of trees, fallen across it at different angles, blocked it, except where, in the centre, room enough for the passage of a vehicle had been with difficulty cleared. Ponsonby here made a rapid stride or two in advance of his companion, and turning and holding out his arms, barred her further progress.

"Ha, my pink of perfection! my bush rose and fairest flower of Bloomsbury!—I hope you are not so cruelly disposed as you were the last time we met," Ponsonby continued, while Mary besought him to let her pass. "I wouldn't

willingly offend you for the world," he went on—"you know I wouldn't. The very thought that I may have done so is killing me—that and your cruelty combined—cruel girl that will grant no favours to her devoted swain. Upon my soul, it is too bad of you, now; and will be the death of me, if you don't relent. I haven't been able to sleep at night since I parted from you last—upon my soul, I haven't—your devoted slave tossing on a bed of wakefulness, when you, careless and cruel one, are sound in the arms of Morpheus—O happy Morpheus!"

"Let me pass, please," demanded Mary. "I will not be stopped in this way. If you are anxious not to offend me, let me pass. You can please me best by keeping out of my way. Let me pass, sir."

"Don't be in such a hurry, my pretty one," he replied, still intercepting her advance. "Miss Robinson, upon my soul, I love you! I adore you, more than I can tell, or than is good for me—and you don't mean to be so unfeeling as to refuse your love-sick slave a kiss or some consolation after coming all this way to meet you. I know you don't mean it, now. Lovely woman is not so hard-hearted as she sometimes tries to make us believe. 'She said, she vowed she'd ne'er consent'—and, well—she wasn't made of adamant, you know—and you're too doosid lusciously lovely to be made of stone, either. This is Love's tollgate, and you must pay your dues before you can pass. Let me take sweet toll from your lips, just this once, and I'll open the gate, and remain your obedient slave ever afterwards."

"You are a wretch!" Mary said, with distress and anger in her voice, "a cowardly wretch to keep me here. Oh, I wish somebody would come. I will pass!"

"Those lips of yours are far too tempting at any time, but when they pout in that way, egad! they're just irresistible," Ponsonby replied, approaching her; and as she tried to dart past him, he caught her, and, throwing his arms about her,

attempted to take the coveted kiss. But Mary was strong and determined, and this was not so easily accomplished.

"I will not," she cried. "I will not. Help! Oh, Maurice."

There was a rush of rapid footsteps, and Ponsonby was flung backward against a log by a strong hand. The same hand picked him up again and shook him till his teeth rattled.

M'Keown had come over to Robinson's, and, finding that Mary had not yet returned, had started off quickly down the road to meet her. Mrs. Robinson had been just about sending Billy off to meet his sister, but, at a word from Maurice the boy had willingly transferred that duty to him.

M'Keown's approach had not been noticed in the gathering twilight, for from where the others stood the view was partially obscured by some wineberry bushes and other growth, that had sprung up by the side of the track.

"What is this?" he said, fiercely, "and who are you that insults an unprotected girl on a lonely road? By heaven! you deserve to have every bone in your body broken—and I have a great mind to do it." And he shook him again.

Had this encounter not occurred in real life, but been described in the pages of a fashionable novel, the rustic lover would, of course, have been felled to the ground, incapable of resistance against the aristocratic one—the latter's skill, and the highly-trained and developed strength of his (perhaps) "slender, graceful, but lithe and athletic form," would soon have disposed of his homely antagonist—but as it was, Ponsonby felt that resistance on his part would be worse than useless. He had made some mark in the cricket field, and could kick a goal at football; was even wont to boast of his skill and prowess with his fists; and, indeed, under ordinary circumstances held a pretty high opinion of his powers of body (as well as of mind), and was not deficient in courage of a sort; but he now knew by the grip of the hand that held him by the collar, and the angry face in front of him, that he was in a very awkward fix indeed.

"Oh, look here, now," he managed to say, "this is too

doosid bad, you know—I have walked out with the girl before—and if a fellow should try to take a kiss, there's nothing so very dreadful in that, you know."

"There would be nothing dreadful in it at all," replied the other, "if the girl didn't object, or if your kiss was an honest one. But your kisses are foul, man—they're not the kisses of an honest lover—and if I should hit you on the dirty mouth, as I ought to do, well, you would want a new set of teeth before you went love-making again."

"Oh, well," said Ponsonby, "I don't suppose there is much harm in a gentleman trying to kiss a pretty girl, even though he mayn't exactly mean to marry her. But," he added apologetically, for he felt the grip tightening on his collar—"but I love Miss Robinson honestly enough—upon my soul, I do!"

"Your soul!" replied M'Keown. "Your soul's a miserable shrunk-up, shrivelled thing: and I could shake it out of you into your boots—as I've a mind to do. You're a gentleman, too; are you indeed? Well, I'm glad you told me that, because I should never have thought it of you, if you hadn't let me know. Over at Ashwin's—there's a gentleman, now—we've got a tom-cat that has killed many a gentleman as good as you: it's only a rat you are, a stinking, thieving, sneaking rat of a gentleman. And now I'll tell you what I'll do with you, my fine gentleman," he added, looking about him. "I could smash in your face so that your mother wouldn't know you, though she had only parted with you an hour ago, and you would deserve it; but if ever you try to force yourself on this young girl again—if you ever even cast a light look at her—by the God above me, I will settle with you for it! And now—go there!"

And retaining his hold on Mr. Ponsonby's collar with the one hand, and with the other seizing him by the handiest part of his garments, he fairly lifted him off his feet, and pitched him head first over one of the fallen tree-trunks into a space between it and another, where a soft, yielding mass of the

prickly, fast-clinging, flesh-scoring "lawyer" vines, intermixed with other growth, received and enveloped him, all but his legs, which were still visible above the log.

"Now, Mary, we'll go home," said Maurice, with some remnant of sternness in his voice.

Mary had been standing a little distance off, in some anxiety and distress lest Maurice in his anger should inflict severe punishment on the other, and was now relieved in mind at the bloodless, if somewhat ludicrous, termination of the affair.

"Oh, Maurice, do you think he will get out?" she asked, with a return of merriment in her voice, when they had gone a little way.

"Well," he replied, "if he stays there till I pull him out he'll spend the night there, and the mosquitos will have time to tickle him. I might go back in the morning if I thought he was there then, and set him on his feet again. But," looking back, "I think I can make him out taking himself off towards Bloomsbury."

Maurice was unusually silent at first on the way back, and strode along at a pace that Mary found it difficult to keep up with. She was afraid he was offended with her, and attached some blame to her for allowing Ponsonby the opportunity of proceeding to the length he had gone in forcing his attentions upon her, or for, perhaps, giving him some encouragement.

Maurice still continued to walk in silence, and they had got well nigh home, when a half-stifled sob arrested him.

"Eh! What!" he cried, stopping suddenly: "not crying, Mary, surely? What a brute I am!" And then asked abruptly, but with some return of tenderness in his tone:

"Did he walk out all the way with you, Mary?"

"No, indeed, Maurice," she replied, drying her tears. "He was waiting near that same place, and when we got there he wouldn't let me pass."

"Did he kiss you, Mary?" he asked.

"Indeed, he did not," she answered; "but it's hard to

say—he might have—if you hadn't come just in time. Oh, Maurice, I was so glad to see you."

"Because," Maurice went on, but lovingly now, "if he had taken a kiss I would have liked you to wash your face before I asked you for one for myself."

"I mightn't give you one," she said coyly, her usual self again, all trace of grief having fled from eyes and voice. And then she added, demurely:

"He didn't kiss me, Maurice."

"That means that I may take one, I suppose?" he answered.

"Ah! but," she said, "when I give you leave to take *one*, you always take twenty."

"I never was good at arithmetic, Mary," he replied; "it was my failing at school, and when it comes to counting kisses, I am the greatest dunce in the world. Ah, Mary, sweet Mary," he said, after he had taken her in his arms and kissed her, "you will not put me off any longer after this—you will give me the right to watch over you."

"I suppose I must," she said, and nestled closer to him.

Ah, youthful love and pure, and all the sweet delights of it, what a weary world this would be if you were banished from it! Eve robbed Eden of it and them when she came away, and left no equal joys behind her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS. POWLET was not without some trouble of her own. About this time her married daughter, Mrs. Heskett, came back to her mother's house with her two children. Her husband had proved to be a useless ne'er-do-well, who now, after getting through all that he and his wife had ever been possessed of, had taken to ill-using her.

As long as he could draw on her father's purse, he had preserved some show of kindness for her. But Bob, after consulting with Mrs. Powlet, had latterly refused to make any further attempt at keeping Heskett's head financially above water; and now their daughter, after much persuasion, had come back to live with them.

They had helped to start him on a farm at first, in another part of the district; and when he had well-nigh melted the farm away, and saw an opening to get into a public-house in that neighbourhood—a line of life for which he thought he was peculiarly well fitted, Powlet again subsidised him with the necessary funds. But disaster followed him here also, and after a couple of years, during which he took still more to drink, and became a constant drag on his father-in-law's means, he was sold up. He then, with what he could lay his hands on out of the wreck, took a cottage in his township, and lived for a few weeks there with his wife and children. Generally in a half-drunken state, he was now constantly grumbling at his wife, and complaining of the way in which he was treated by her “close-fisted old father” and her “shrew

of a mother," and began to ill-treat her more than he had ever previously done. She was at length prevailed on to leave him and return to her old home, for Powlet had sworn that the fellow would never receive another sixpence of his.

The private apartments of the Criterion now, therefore, resounded with the voices of children ; and their white heads and noisy mirth might be seen and heard occasionally in some of the passages, into which they were apt to make incursions if opportunity offered and if their grandmother was out of the way.

Their mother was a saddened, broken-down woman ; and, as Powlet remarked to one of his friends, " Gad, she's as old-looking as her mother, every bit ; and I'll be bound to say there's more life in the old woman yet, and ten times the spirit."

Mrs. Powlet was kind to her daughter and very fond of the children, but she kept the latter under strict discipline. She was apt to get angry at the very mention of Heskett's name.

" I never want to hear the fellow's name again," she said one evening to Wilmot and two or three others when reference had been made in some way to her son-in-law and his doings. Frank Ashwin was there. He had been passing through, late, and had stayed for dinner at the Criterion. It was the same evening as that in which Ponsonby made acquaintance with the "lawyers," as detailed in the preceding chapter, and his absence at dinner, and since, had given rise to some comment.

Ashwin was anxious on Mary Robinson's account, for Spalding had told him that he had seen Ponsonby strolling out in the direction of Robinson's and that Mary had been in the township. Frank had intended to give Ponsonby a word of friendly advice and warning, but had hitherto neglected to do so, or had lacked the opportunity.

" I never want to hear the fellow's name again," Mrs.

Powlet said—"the miserable, low-lifed scoundrel, that's what he is! He'd better not show himself within Powlet's reach or mine; I don't say within reach of my hands—not but I would like to lay my mark on him—but he'll get the weight of my tongue, at any rate, if he comes near enough. I never liked the fellow, and it wasn't with my will that my daughter married him. I did all I thought I ought to do to stop it; but when love gets into a young girl's head and heart you know it's hard to get it out again—sense and reason are just pitched clean away. She'll have her own way if she can, and it's not much use trying to turn her. If you stop the steam coming out of the spout of the boiling kettle it'll only lift the lid. My daughter made her bed, and she has lain in it; but she'll never want as long as Powlet and me has anything—nor the children either. I hope they'll not take after their father—the boy's something like him in feature—but a lot depends on the bringing-up. And here's Mr. Ponsonby at last," she exclaimed, as that gentleman passed the door of the sitting-room.

"Hallo, Ponsonby," Spalding cried, "come in and give an account of yourself."

He had had a long beer at the bar, and had washed himself at a creek on the road; but the marks which the "lawyers" had made were plainly visible on his face and hands.

"Well, I never," Mrs. Powlet cried, when she had a look at him after he entered the room; "wherever have you been? You're scratched and torn about, and bitten with mosquitos or something, till you're a sight to see."

And the others gathered round him, and plied him with questions, and made comments on his appearance, laughing the while.

"Bushed," he answered, succeeding with an effort in preserving his slow and somewhat affected style of speech. "Got into this infernal New Zealand bush of yours, and, egad, I was nearly spending the night in it, too: but, luckily,

I never quite lost my bearings, and managed to get out before it got dark altogether—but not before I tripped and tumbled into one of your infernal, horrid ‘lawyers,’ with the result you see.”

“And missed dinner, too,” said Mrs. Powlet; “but I’ll soon get you something nice to eat,” she added, as she hurried off for that purpose.

“It’s a demmed, disgusting country—the whole of it,” Ponsonby continued, “and not fit for a gentleman to exist in. It’s only fit for a lot of demmed bushwhackers and hulking clodhoppers to get about in—a demmed disgusting country.”

“Come, come, Ponsonby,” said Ashwin, “you mustn’t rail at the country, and run it down in that way, because you got among the ‘lawyer’ bushes. They’re apt to lay hold on one, and leave their mark, like the lawyers of flesh and blood sometimes do. Those scratches of yours won’t heal for a month. What piece of bush did you get lost in?”

“How do I know?” Ponsonby replied. “One infernal piece of bush is the same as another to me.”

“You couldn’t have gone very far,” remarked Spalding; “for I saw you turning down Robinson Road about five o’clock, and there’s not much standing bush near that road for a good way out.”

“I hope you haven’t been trying to poach on somebody’s preserves. I had a mind to give you a bit of advice on that head, but I fancy, from the way you talk, you don’t need it now. Poaching’s a dangerous thing sometimes.”

“The unlawful pursuit of game,” said Spalding, and laughed. “You’ll be getting among the lawyers in earnest if you try on that sort of thing.”

“Have your joke, gentlemen; have your joke—it doesn’t hurt me, and, I suppose, amuses you,” Ponsonby replied, rather annoyed at the turn the conversation was taking, but determined to pass it off lightly. “I didn’t say I kept that

road. I might have turned off through the paddocks to get across to Ashwin's road here, and he knows there's some bush there."

"Yes, to be sure," said Spalding, who seemed bent on tracing Ponsonby's movements; "but I should have thought you wouldn't have had time to get there, and would have had more sense than go into that big block so near dark. Besides, you might have seen the ghost of that fellow Westall—eh, Wilmot? His bones are lying in it somewhere, I suppose."

"Ghost be demmed!" said Ponsonby: "I'm going to have a wash and something to eat." And he left.

Wilmot started at the mention of Westall's name, and felt called on to make some reply.

"I do not believe that what you say is at all likely to be correct," he said, in the rather stiff and pompous manner of speaking which he generally adopted. "The man, aided by some accomplice, no doubt got clear away, and has, so far, evaded pursuit and capture. I should indeed be grieved to think that my hand, though raised in self-defence, had inflicted mortal injury upon a fellow creature. The blow struck was not, I now think, sufficiently heavy to inflict such an injury. The fellow, whoever he may have been, has had a lesson which he will not soon forget—and there is no actual proof that he was this Westall, who certainly has disappeared from the district—and I have communicated this fact to the firm of solicitors at home, from whom I received the small allowance which I was instructed to measure out to him. The fellow, I say, has had a lesson, and I really now sincerely hope that he may remain at large. Mr. Ashwin," he proceeded, "I believe I could have sold your property—and could sell it now—at the price first named. It is a somewhat unusual procedure on the part of a seller to raise the price to the extent to which you did—so suddenly."

"Well," replied Ashwin, who was beginning to feel a little confused, "on second consideration I thought the place ought

to be worth more than I first asked—in fact, I—a—changed my mind, I suppose, and thought it might not be advisable to sell out—just at present—except at a really good price, you know."

"Why, Ashwin, I was surprised to hear that you had any idea of selling out," remarked Spalding.

"Oh, sometimes I take the notion in my head that I had better. I have had hankerings now and again lately after South Africa. I was born in New Zealand, you know, and sometimes I think I ought to see a little more of the world."

"It was a remarkable coincidence," Wilmot went on, "these remarkable and wholly unconnected coincidences will sometimes occur—a remarkable coincidence, that your neighbour—a—Elwood, about the same time advertised his property for sale also, and as suddenly withdrew it." ("Confound the man," thought Ashwin, "I wish Morton was here.") Wilmot continued: "The man, I understand, is a retired—I mean an expiree convict—and was lately recognised as such by one of his old associates here; and this was supposed at the time to account for his desire to dispose of his property. Do you, who have, I believe, some acquaintance with the man—being his near neighbour—do you know of any reason why he should have changed his intention of leaving, as he appears to have done?"

"I do not;" replied Ashwin, "nothing definite. He was insulted by this man whom he had known formerly, and who for some reason bears him much ill-will, and may have formed a sudden resolution to leave the place, annoyed, as no doubt he was, by the fellow's presence in the neighbourhood; and afterwards—well—changed his mind. I believe Mr. Elwood to be a deeply injured man, incapable of perpetrating the crime for which he suffered, and entirely innocent of it."

"Ha, indeed," said Wilmot, "how very extraordinary, if it should be so. Yet, I believe, innocent men before now have had to atone for the wrong-doing of others—

but such cases are rare. The law, as at present administered, is quick at detection, and keen and skilful in searching out and sifting evidence, and is rarely at fault. You have been made acquainted with—a—Elwood's history, then?"

"Only a brief outline of it," Ashwin replied. "He suffered through the roguery of his partner, who got clear away with his ill-gotten gains, leaving Elwood to meet charges of misappropriation and forgery, which he then knew of for the first time. These had been carried out with such cleverness and cunning—with the design, probably, of throwing suspicion on Elwood, or of compelling him to share in them or preserve silence concerning them, if Elwood himself had previously made the discovery—that he could not clear himself of participation in the frauds: and was convicted and sent out as a convict to Western Australia."

"Very sad, no doubt," said Wilmot, "if true—and—probably it is. And what became of this partner of his?" he enquired.

"He does not know, I think," replied Ashwin. "He got away at first to Spain, but since then Elwood, I believe, has had no tidings of him. I have seen the old man once or twice just lately, and I fancy—it may only be fancy—that his manner is brighter and more hopeful than it was before. Who knows? he may have some expectation of even yet clearing his character."

"Ha!" said Wilmot, "do you think so? Well, it would be only right that he should have the opportunity—if his case is such as you believe it to be."

Ashwin shortly afterwards left, and rode home. M'Keown was late in returning to the wharé that night, but on the following morning he could not conceal his happiness, and told his friend and employer that Mary had promised to be his wife. Ashwin congratulated him warmly, and said, "I suppose I shall soon be losing you now, Maurice?"

"Oh, not for some time yet, Mr. Frank, if you want me to stay," he replied. "This year's felled bush has to be burned yet, and some sort of a house put up. Besides, there's not much use in a chap going on to land—especially if he takes a wife with him—without a bit of money to stock it and keep the pot boiling for a while. Another year on wages would just about put me straight; and Mary would rather wait a bit."

Maurice also told Ashwin how he had pitched Ponsonby head-first into the bramble bushes on the previous evening for forcing his company on Mary and offering rudeness to her on her way home, but asked Ashwin not to mention the matter, as he did not wish his sweetheart's name coupled in anyway with Ponsonby's.

Ashwin laughed heartily over Ponsonby's discomfiture, and understood clearly then in what manner that gentleman had got "bushed."

Wilmot was given some uneasiness by what Ashwin had said relative to Elwood. It has been stated that immediately after Westall's disappearance, Wilmot had begun to quietly make some preparations with a view to a speedy departure, should such be found necessary. Since then, however, he had to some extent abandoned his purpose, for owing to the continued absence of Westall he had begun to indulge with some confidence in the hope that he would see him no more; and his mind had been still further relieved when Elwood's intention of going away was made apparent. The change of purpose on Elwood's part had certainly puzzled and annoyed him, but he had hoped that the withdrawal of the farm from sale would only be temporary. But now when he heard from Ashwin of the old man appearing brighter and more hopeful, his fears inclined him to associate the change in demeanour and purpose, in some way, with Westall, and he determined to get in readiness for any emergency—for it was

his boast that he was always prepared for any fate. During the next few weeks he sold two or three of his sections in the township, and also influenced a Wellington investor to take over some of the mortgages which he held on properties in the district. Whatever course he might ultimately follow, he felt the necessity of having ready money at command. He also threw out some hints that it might be necessary for him to take a run home before long. He saw that his continuance here was likely to be attended with risk; and though he still clung to the hope that circumstances would yet permit of his remaining, he nevertheless deemed it wisest to make preparations for departure.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE summer meanwhile wore on. The new year came in, and the weather continued hot and dry. The open lands nearer the coast were beginning to be seriously affected by the absence of rain, and complaints were being made of the shortness of feed. The bush districts, more fortunate in such a season in their more humid climate and richer, deeper soil, had not yet suffered much. Light showers, which had passed over the open country, had fallen at intervals—refreshing the grass, but not penetrating the ground to any depth, and were soon absorbed again by the hot sun and drying winds.

The season promised to be a good one for bush-burning : and those who had bush-felled were congratulating themselves on the prospect of getting excellent “burns,” while many, who, in previous unfavourable seasons, had been unfortunate in getting bad “burns,” were now hopeful of clearing off much of the timber by means of a second fire.

A few, fearful of a change in the weather, had already burned with fairly satisfactory results ; and the general topic of conversation on all sides was of bush-burning.

Log fires in grassed paddocks, amongst timber that had been down for a year or more, had been started in many places where no danger of their spreading into the fallen bush was anticipated. The air was becoming heavy with the smoke of these and of the larger forest fires. Occasionally, near or in the distance, when one of these latter had been

lighted, a pillar of dense smoke would be seen curling upwards in vast volume high in air, or till its top reached and became blended with the clouds; and at night the reflection of these and of their after-glow crimsoned the heavens in many directions.

The weather still continued dry. No rain at all had fallen for some weeks. Bush fires were more frequent. Decaying timber, the remnants of former fires, and the dead but still standing trees and stumps were now like tinder.

The grass, too, where it was understocked, or had been allowed to run to seed, was ready to carry fire.

The wind had been westerly, and Ashwin had not yet burned his bush, for he had been waiting for a change of wind. At length the wind shifted to the east in the night, and on the following forenoon, with a stiff breeze, he and M'Keown fired up, and with splendid results. "Not as much firewood left as would boil the billy," Maurice said afterwards, with much exaggeration.

The latter, as soon as the fire was well under way, started off to look after the burning of the bush on his own section, which lay at a distance of some hours hard riding.

He had seen the smoke of fires in that direction lately, and had heard that several in the vicinity had already burned; and was anxious to see how matters stood, and, if possible, take advantage of the favouring wind, for he, too, was anxious to burn with an easterly one.

But the wind, which had been only moderately strong in the forenoon, gradually increased in force, and before night fell it was blowing a gale. Fires sprang up in all directions. Where, previously, only a smouldering log lay was now a place of raging fire, which sent forward a stream of sparks to catch on other timber, and, there, by the force of the gale to be fanned into flame—each new starting-point of fire, in its turn, sending its glowing emissaries onward to attach themselves, over an ever-

widening belt, to log or stump or dry standing tree. One of the latter might be a rata, left standing on account of its enormous size by the bushfaller of a previous year: and now, with the noise of a furnace in full blast, the fire would roar upward through its hollow heart, or coil in lambent delight round its gnarled and interlocked stems, or where, even in death, it still clasped the remains of the former living support to which it had at first clung, but which afterwards, as the long years rolled away, it had slowly but surely strangled in the ardour of its fatal embrace.

Many settlers' houses were threatened with destruction, and in many places stock were in danger.

Round the outskirts of Bloomsbury fires burnt fiercely; and though towards the centre of the township most of the dead timber had been cleared away or burnt up by former fires, yet even here some remaining stumps and logs had caught, and many of the townspeople were out keeping watch and ward, and combating the aggressive foe as it seized on some new vantage-ground, or menaced some building. Few sought their beds on that night. The whole country seemed to be on fire. The heavens were in a glow—deepened and accentuated at several points where a fiercer and more extensive body of flame gave brighter reflection. It was a sight of grandeur. Audible above the roar of the storm might be heard at intervals the crash of falling timber—far-resounding and earth-shaking, when some mighty forest monarch was brought low. Exaggerated reports were current in the township of country settlers' houses having been destroyed, and of heavy losses of stock; but these reports lacked confirmation, for most of the roads leading into Bloomsbury were impassable through fire.

It was a night to be remembered.

Robinson's house was, so far, not threatened, and the

logging up and clearing, which he had previously effected round it, rendered it unlikely that it would be endangered. But between his place and the township a broad belt of conflagration had crossed the country in the direction of Ashwin's and Elwood's on the other road.

In the afternoon, when the wind increased to a gale, and fires began to spread, Ashwin collected his stock into the paddock by the wharé, where the timber was less plentiful, and the grass more closely eaten down, and afterwards rode down to Elwood's to render any assistance that might be needed there. By his advice and help the stock there also were removed to the situation offering the greatest safety.

But when this had been done it was nearly dark, and the vanguard of the fire from Robinson's direction had reached the road. On the section through which it had just come, a great many dry trees had been left standing, and the grass was long, for the owner did not live on the section, and had not fully stocked it. These trees, when the fire caught them and ran up into their tops, sent forward a far-reaching shower of flaming bark and branchlets. The fire was here, therefore, rapid in its progress, advancing by long leaps, and by the time Ashwin returned from shifting Elwood's sheep, it was raging on the road between him and his own place, and Elwood's house and outbuildings were beginning to be in danger.

The house lay on the edge only of the fiery belt, and the garden and cultivation in front saved it from any actual approach of fire along the surface of the ground, but the sparks from a burning tree on the opposite side of the road were borne at times against the buildings, as the wind, in fierce gushes, swept across, varying occasionally a few points in its direction.

Prompt measures were taken. Water was dashed against the boards and into all seams and crevices where a spark

was likely to find lodgment. Some incipient fires among the timber on the road abreast of the house were also watered out. Tubs and casks were filled in readiness for any sudden outbreak, should such occur, in the buildings, and a keen watch was kept over all. In these measures everyone assisted, though the task was a most unpleasant one, for blinding smoke often enveloped them. They felt the emergency to be great, and that it was necessary to put forth all their efforts. Miss Elwood and the young servant, when the danger was at its height, drew water and carried it, first, however, placing damped coverings on their heads, and wrapping wetted ulsters round themselves, so as to minimise the risk they ran from flying sparks. Ted was in great form, and worked like a Trojan. He was in a state of intense excitement, and enjoyment also; and, had the house caught fire, would, no doubt, have felt great pleasure in watching the blaze. The old man was alarmed and flurried, and not able to be of much service.

On the hired man and on Ashwin devolved the chief exertions: and the latter directed everything. The measures taken were successful so far, and the greatest danger seemed past, for the wind now appeared to have shifted slightly, and carried the sparks in great measure clear of the house, though still alarmingly near. The tree, also, from which these sparks had issued in most dangerous volume, at length fell—but with a crash, and an upspringing of fiery fragments that struck terror for the moment into the minds of the watchers. Afterwards, however, the risk from this source practically ceased, for the sparks were now less numerous and not so far-reaching.

Night had set in some hours back, but the glare from the flaming tree-tops and from the other innumerable fires made the scene almost as light as day. It was a grand and awe-inspiring sight, as now with fascinated eyes they found time to gaze on it. From where they stood to a little beyond

Morton's was the only part that seemed to have escaped. Here, the green bush which, as has been previously mentioned, bordered the road on the opposite side, and stretched back for nearly a mile, stopped the advance of the fire. It also, where it rose over a swell of the downs some little way from the road, sheltered even Elwood's house in some degree from the full fury of the gale.

But beyond Morton's, away towards Bloomsbury, and in every other direction, the ruddy glow of countless fires lit up the sky; while, near at hand, towards Ashwin's, and backward now through Elwood's paddocks on that side, the still standing trees, forked with flame and gleaming red from base to summit, swept by the unchecked force of the wind, stood out in conspicuous brightness above a thousand lower centres of scattered fires.

"It's a good job we got the sheep out of that back paddock, Mr. Elwood," said Ashwin; "see how the fire is raging among the timber there now. Well, it will do it a lot of good, and make clear ground of it now; and though some of the fencing may go, and some grass seed be needed, you'll find that the benefit afterwards will far more than compensate you."

"If it had not been for you, Mr. Ashwin," replied the old man, "I should have lost a good many of my sheep to-night. You have saved my house also from destruction. This but adds to the heavy debt of gratitude which I already owe you."

"And, oh, Mr. Ashwin," exclaimed Miss Elwood, "while you have been doing all this for us, what has become of your own place. Look at the dreadful fires in that direction. Oh, how selfish we have been," she added, with much concern.

"Do not distress yourself, I beg of you, Miss Elwood," he answered. "I expect everything is safe over there. I put the stock in a paddock where there is virtually no risk, and no doubt they are all right. I could have done nothing more for

them even if I had stayed there. It is pretty clear of timber round the wharé and the shed—there are no standing trees anywhere near. The fire from my burned bush would not spread in that direction: and if this fire from the other road has got into my back paddock, it will not have travelled as quickly as it has done here. I don't think the wharé is in any danger yet: besides," he added, laughing, "if it has been burnt down, it would not be a very serious loss—not but there are several things in it I shouldn't like to lose—and, as you are pretty safe here now, I think I shall try and make my way over, and have a look at things. Maurice may have returned. If all is right I shall be back again before long."

"But surely you will not attempt to get there now—past all those raging fires on the road, and through that blinding smoke—you surely will not attempt it, Mr. Ashwin. Oh, pray do not," she said, anxiously.

"The task would not be quite so difficult as it looks," he answered. "The wind appears to have lulled a little, and the fires are not burning so fiercely as they were—and some of them must have pretty well burnt themselves out by this time. I think I can manage to get through. I can only make the attempt, and if I find it too hot I will return. There were no trees that could have fallen and blocked the track. My horse is quiet, and I can soon rush him through the thickest of the smoke, or past a burning log or two."

Mr. Elwood also entered his protest against what to him appeared little short of madness. But Ashwin was not to be dissuaded, and ridiculed their fears for his safety, looking softly, with eyes of love, at Miss Elwood, as, in her concern for him, she forgot, for the moment, the reserve in speech and manner which she had lately maintained when in his company.

Before leaving, however, he took the man—Jim was

his name—and they, together, again saturated the boards of the buildings, sending water into every crack and cranny. Ashwin instructed Jim to do the same again after some time, in the event of his not returning.

"The wind may shift slightly back again, or increase in force; and it is always best to be on the safe side," he said. "Don't waste water—a pannikinful, well directed, will do more good than a bucketful thrown away."

Elwood and his daughter and Ted went out to the road with Ashwin when he was leaving. Looking along the line of it, it appeared a terrible gauntlet of fire that he would have to run.

"Do not go, Mr. Ashwin—do not go—there is too much danger," pleaded Miss Elwood.

"The danger is nothing," he answered lightly: "and if I find there is much risk, I can easily turn back."

He mounted and rode forward, with his dog following close on the heels of his horse, and they watched him till the thick smoke enveloped and hid him from their sight, and they then turned back towards the house.

"I trust he will find all safe at his own place—if he is able, indeed, to reach there. It would give me life-long regret if his help to us here should have been the cause of loss to him at home," Mr. Elwood said, and added, after a pause: "The wind has increased in violence again. Look at the tall trees yonder, how the fury of it has re-awakened them into intensity of glow and lengthened shoots of flame. What a grand but awful sight it all is. Hark! What a crash! Another giant tree has been brought down. 'The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedar trees, the Lord breaketh the cedars of Lebanon.'"

They had barely reached the house when the furious gallop of a horse startled them, and a moment afterwards the one Ashwin had ridden swept past the gate, snorting in fear, and with bridle rein and stirrups flying in the wind.

"He has been thrown, and may be lying injured, or killed. Oh, the cruel fires, too—What can be done?" cried Miss Elwood; and then, instantly collecting her thoughts, she called out: "Ted, run down to Morton's—tell them there what has happened—fly for your life—where is Jim?—Father, Jim ought, perhaps, to stay with you, he may be needed here, or you can send him after me. But I will go, I may be of help before the others arrive." And without waiting for reply she sped away on the wings of love and fear.

"Come back, Maud, my child, come back. What madness is this?" cried her father. But the words were unheeded. He then went hurriedly to look for his man, but it was some little time before he found him, and could explain what had occurred, and what he wanted him to do. The old man was breathlessly excited, and could hardly find utterance, and Jim was somewhat dull of comprehension and slow in his movements.

Meanwhile, Miss Elwood proceeded at a rapid pace along the road, now pausing for a moment to recover breath after hurrying through a denser mass of smoke, now gathering all her courage to rush past a spot of more than ordinary danger, where the flames almost blocked the track. Once or twice she was compelled to wait for a momentary lull, or at least the cessation of a fiercer gust, before darting past. But still she sped ever anxiously onward, braving dangers of which she was hardly conscious of the magnitude, and the least of which at another time she would have shrunk from encountering.

It was a few short, sharp barks from Ashwin's dog that first told her she was near the object of her quest; and, a short distance farther, the dog himself met her joyously, and turned and ran before her to where his master lay.

Ashwin had proceeded thus far with safety, though

his horse was showing, more and more, symptoms of fear as an advance was made into the region of smoke and fire. At this point further progress seemed to be completely arrested. In front the flames from a heavier mass of timber were driven almost across the cleared track, while a still standing rata tree, just over the fence on the left, sent forth a thick and continuous stream of sparks, the smoke from both of these being intense, and, in itself, forming an almost insuperable obstacle to further advance. The horse refused to venture near, and Ashwin was about to dismount in order to make a closer inspection of the difficulty in front of him, and, if possible, to lead his horse past it, when, with a noise like thunder, the burning tree came down, striking the wire fence and sending a shower of sparks and flaming fragments across the road. The horse, terrified out of all control, leaped wildly away from these, and, falling over a log himself, threw his rider heavily against another, and then, regaining his feet, turned and galloped madly back the way he had come.

Ashwin lay stunned against the log. Happily it was not on fire where he lay, though burning dangerously near. His dog, conscious that something was wrong, tried to rouse him, and licked his hands and face: and then, finding this of no avail, he would set up a series of sharp, anxious barks, as if desirous of calling assistance and directing it to the spot, and then again cease barking and make his mute appeal as before.

Miss Elwood found Ashwin still lying unconscious where he had been thrown, and, exerting all her strength, she drew him round a little from the log, placing him in a more comfortable position, and raised his head, and spoke wild words of endearment and self-reproach. She ran to a stream that fortunately crossed the road near by, and brought water and bathed his brow and his wounded head. She had to go more than once for water, for the only way

she could carry any was in her boot, and it did not hold very much; and when she returned the second time the stocking was torn, and the poor foot bleeding through contact with a sharp root. Her efforts, however, were rewarded, for with a sigh Ashwin returned to consciousness—dimly at first and with muttered words of vague import.

“Where am I?” he said, at length, struggling to rise but only able to sit up with Miss Elwood’s help. “What is this?—ah! now I remember—stupid horse. But you here, Miss Elwood?” he exclaimed, as he realised who it was that was so near him—“all alone, too? Oh, loved one, what is this?—How could you come here—through the fires—all alone, too? You risked your life for me.”

“I only hurried on here first,” she replied. “Help will soon be here. Ted ran to Morton’s when we saw your horse gallop past, and Jim will be here immediately. But you are hurt—badly hurt. Oh, how glad I was when your senses returned—I was afraid you were killed.”

“Oh, I’ll soon be all right,” he answered. “Stunned a bit, I must have been, and this shoulder feels stiff. But what an angel of mercy you have been to come to me here, through all the fire and smoke. You risked your life for me,” he said again. “Oh, my love, my love! you make me wish to die even here now with you beside me, rather than go through life without you.”

“Hush,” she answered, “you must not speak like this. I will fetch more water and bathe your head again—the wound is still bleeding.” And she hastened to the stream again, and soaked her handkerchief in it, and filled the dainty boot again, and returned and knelt by him, and wiped the blood from his temple and bathed the wound.

The dog now began to prick up his ears and show other signs of expectancy—but in the opposite direction to that in which they looked for help to come—and at

length leaped forward with a joyful bark to meet someone who came with a rush through the dense body of smoke and fire which had checked Ashwin's advance. It was Maurice.

"Ugh!" he said, as he stopped to expel the smoke from his lungs, "that was just about hot enough. Hallo, Scot! what has brought you here? Your master's not far off when you're about;" and then, as he caught sight of Ashwin seated on the ground with Miss Elwood standing beside him, he exclaimed, "Good heavens! what has happened? Are you hurt, sir?—much hurt? How was it?"

Ashwin told him in a few words.

"I am feeling fairly right now, though," he said, "thanks to my kind nurse and deliverer. But," he added, "we must get Miss Elwood back again out of this as soon as possible. Just help me on to my feet, will you? Ah, the other side, Maurice—there is something not quite right with the left. Ah, now I'm right—just a little giddy, though, for a moment. I'll be able to walk now—but not very fast, perhaps."

"I'll carry you every inch of the way, if you'll let me," Maurice said.

"I know you would, good fellow that you are," Ashwin replied, "but I can walk all right;" and he added, as Miss Elwood turned away a few steps to draw on her wet boot, "I'm a bit hurt on this left side and shoulder, Maurice—ribs and collar bone or something gone wrong—and I must try and walk along quietly. I couldn't bear you to carry me, even if I wasn't able to walk."

They set out slowly back, Ashwin steadyng his steps with the aid of a light sapling that M'Keown cut for him. Miss Elwood, by his advice, damped her dress again at the stream, and also her hair and the cap that partly covered it, for they had yet some fiery ordeals to pass through before they reached the house.

Ashwin made as light as he could of his injuries.

"What made you come through, Maurice? and how did you leave the wharé and everything?" he asked, as they proceeded.

"Everything is right, so far," Maurice replied. "When I got back there was a bit of fire rather near the wharé—a stump or two had caught somehow. But I watered them out, and gave the wharé itself a good soaking, and the shed also. There is a lot of fire in the back paddocks—I came through that way—but very little towards the front at that end—I saw you had shifted the sheep; and they are all right. And as things looked pretty bad down this way, and help might be needed, I thought I would come on. I expected you were down here."

M'Keown had found his bush just catching alight from a neighbour's fire, and had proceeded to light it further along the windward edge, so that the fire might sweep it in a body; and then, the gale increasing in force, he had ridden hurriedly back, and at considerable risk, for the road he travelled was on fire in many places. He left his horse at Robinson's, and came across the paddocks on foot.

"I wonder Jim has not come up, or some of the others," said Miss Elwood, when they had gone some little distance; "but I suppose they have hardly had time to be here yet. All has passed so quickly—in a few minutes, really—though, looking back, it now seems quite a long time since we saw the horse gallop past."

Maurice here went forward to reconnoitre, for a more than ordinary obstacle in the way of smoke and sparks and forks of flame lay in front of them, and seemed to check further advance, or make it very difficult and dangerous, especially for Miss Elwood, and Ashwin, speaking in low and loving tones, said:

"Your courage, beloved one, outstripped all the others.

You risked your life for me. You braved dangers which others may have feared to face. I would strive to repay you with a life's devotion, but you will not accept it. Oh, dearest one, must my love still be without hope?"

"If the barrier, which you complained I had raised between us, is ever removed, speak to me then; but speak not another word of love till that time comes, if—if it ever should come," she answered, a deeper glow than the forest fires shed overspreading her fair features.

"I must not speak to you at all, then," he answered.

"It would, perhaps, be better if you did not," Miss Elwood replied with a smile; "for since you have not let the present opportunity pass without speaking of love—under novel and trying circumstances, amidst all these fires, yourself hurt—very much hurt, perhaps," she added, anxiously,—"how can I expect you to keep silent on the subject, if you speak to me at all?"

"I would tell you of my love with my dying breath, if you would stoop down to listen," he said.

Maurice now returned, and reported that their passage past the obstruction in front would be attended with much unpleasantness and some risk, but that he did not see any other course than to watch for an opportunity between the gusts, and hurry past, "for," said he, "if we tried to get through the fence into the paddock on either side, things are not much better there—there is fire in every direction—and, so long as we keep the road, we are safe from falling timber. It is a marvel to me," he went on, "how Miss Elwood got past here on her way out."

It now, indeed, appeared a marvel to Miss Elwood herself, as she looked at the roaring fire which bordered the track and shot out tongues of flaine across it, and at the stream of sparks and blinding smoke. Her courage seemed to fail her now in looking at a danger which she had previously faced without hesitation. As they drew near

she viewed with dismay the peril she would be exposed to; but a favourable, momentary lull just then taking place, Maurice, with a "by your leave, Miss," picked her up in his arms and bounded past, and, before she was well aware of what had been done, placed her in a safe position on the other side. Here they found Jim. He then returned for Ashwin.

"You don't stand on much ceremony, Maurice," Ashwin said, with a smile.

"Oh, bother ceremony," replied Maurice. "Ceremony may be a nice chap to take along with you when you have plenty of time on hand, but he's a bit of a hindrance in a place like this."

Ashwin's passage was attended with more difficulty, for he was not able to put on much speed. Maurice wished to take him on his back or in his arms, but Ashwin preferred to make the best of it on foot; and though the exertion gave him great pain, he managed to make a run and get past.

Their dangers were now nearly over. A little farther they met Ted and Mr. Elwood, and also Morton's man and boy whom Ted had roused out of bed. Morton was away from home, else, doubtless, he would have come over earlier in the evening to Elwood's to render assistance.

The old man had been in extreme anxiety for his daughter's safety, and his delight at seeing her again, and uninjured, was great, though damped by regret on account of the accident that had befallen Ashwin.

It was impossible for the doctor to be brought out that night to examine Ashwin's injuries, for the road between Morton's and the township was blocked with fire; and though Maurice offered to make his way in, it was thought better to wait till the morning. Rain came on before daylight, and the wind dropped, and Ashwin was driven in to Bloomsbury in Elwood's buggy.

It was found that besides the wound on his head—

which was not very serious—two of his ribs were broken and his shoulder injured. Mr. Elwood wished him to lie up for a week or two, but Ashwin would not be prevailed upon to do so; and said he would put himself under Mrs. Powlet's care for a short time—which he accordingly did.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ASHWIN wrote home, telling his mother of his mishap. But he made light of it, and said he expected to be himself again in a week or two, when he would go down to Harefield for a few days. He also gave some account of the fire, and particulars of losses which some settlers had sustained, stating that he, fortunately, had escaped without loss of stock or buildings. But his mother, placid and easy-going as she generally was, was not quite satisfied regarding her son's state.

Indeed, the first news which they had of the affair, and which reached them the day before they received Frank's letter, was sufficiently alarming. It was reported that he had been a heavy loser of stock through the fire, and had nearly lost his life in rescuing Miss Elwood from a burning building; but it was further stated by way of compensation that he and that young lady were to be married as soon as he recovered from his injuries.

His letter gave contradiction to part at least of the statements which rumour had furnished, and the minds of his people were in some degree set at rest, but not wholly; for it was now certain that he had met with an accident, though he appeared to consider it of little consequence; and his mother felt some anxiety, thinking it might be of a more serious nature than he, like most young men, was inclined to admit.

His sister, Laura, thought she saw danger of another kind, and believed that rumour could not be altogether at fault in mixing up Miss Elwood's name with the circumstances

of the accident ; and the absence of her name from Frank's letter only tended to increase her suspicions.

"Depend upon it, mother," she said, "that girl has inveigled Frank into her toils again, or rather, he has never got clear of them. I feel it, and am sure of it. When he was here at Christmas, we could get no satisfactory answer from him, you know. Though he would admit nothing, neither would he deny anything ; and though he tried to turn it all off with chaff and fun, I could see—if nobody else could—that there was a serious side to it. And then his talk about selling out and trying his fortunes in South Africa or somewhere else—why, if he had any real intention of doing so, he meant to take the girl with him, that I'm positive of. If other people can't see, I'm not quite blind. Take my word for it, he's still running after that girl, convict's daughter though she be, or she's running after him. Oh, the disgrace of it all."

"Well, my dear," said her mother, "though I don't think there is much ground for alarm about Frank, one way or another ; still, I think I will drive up and see how he is, and you had better come with me. Perhaps your father will drive us ; if not, we can get Tom—I don't think they are very busy just now. We shall have to stay at the hotel in Bloomsbury for the night, and can return the next day ; and we can bring Frank back with us, if he should be able to stand the journey."

Mrs. Ashwin's resolve was carried into effect ; and the following forenoon saw the party start on their fifty miles' journey in a comfortable, roomy buggy, behind a pair of well-bred, serviceable horses, with Tom, Frank's brother, in charge.

Their way for a good many miles lay through the open country, which, in the brown and bare appearance of the pastures, showed how dry the season had been. When they got well into the bush country, the effects of the late fires, and of the storm which had been the cause and accompaniment of these, began to be everywhere visible,

Fences were burnt down in many instances; and in several places where standing bush bordered the road, trees had been blown down, and traffic stopped; but men had already cut a passage-way through these, or had made a temporary road round them. The atmosphere was still dimly charged with smoke.

Nearing Bloomsbury, the destructive effects became more apparent. In one place some carcasses of sheep, scorched and blackened, lay in a corner of a paddock where the timber had been plentiful, and they had been hemmed in by the fire. In another place a settler was seen mournfully gazing at the charred remains of what had been his home.

But though a good deal of present individual loss and much temporary inconvenience resulted from the fire, yet, on the whole, and looking to the future, there would be a gain. Clear pastures, never again to be swept in the same way by fire, would take the place of ground lately thickly strewn with timber, through which stock had with difficulty fed, and out of which they had with still greater difficulty to be mustered.

The travellers rested and lunched at an inn about half-way; and it was nearly five o'clock in the evening when they drove up to the Criterion, in Bloomsbury, where they were met by Bob Powlet, who handed the ladies over to the charge of his wife, while he himself gave instructions regarding the feeding and care of the horses.

Frank Ashwin, who had been lying down on one of the couches in the upstairs sitting-room, was surprised, though much pleased, to see his mother and the others.

"I didn't expect you would be so anxious about me as to come all the way up here, mother. It isn't often that you make such a long journey, and I am afraid you have found this one very tiring," he said, after the first greetings were over. "You see there is not much the matter with me after all."

"A good deal the matter with you," his mother answered,

"with your arm in a sling, and that nasty cut on your head. I'll not be content unless you come back home with me."

"Not for a week or so," he said. "I have got to keep very quiet for a little, it seems. But you can leave me without any anxiety in Mrs. Powlet's hands. Isn't that so, Mrs. Powlet?" he said, as that good woman appeared at the door, intent on the comfort of her newly-arrived guests, and waiting to show them to their rooms.

"Indeed, I'll do the best I can for him," said Mrs. Powlet, in her cheery way, "as long as he likes to stay. But the difficulty with young people is to keep them quiet enough. They will be exerting themselves and doing what they oughtn't to do, instead of keeping quiet and getting better as fast as they can. If Mr. Ashwin here would only keep in his bed for a week or two, as the doctor told him, he would get well twice as fast. But, no—he must be up and dressed, as if there was nothing the matter with him, and him with broken ribs, too."

"Ah, Frank, you did not tell me that—my poor boy!" his mother said.

It was not till later in the evening, after dinner, that Miss Ashwin broached the subject that lay nearest her heart. She and her mother and Frank were then seated in the private sitting-room together.

"We heard such a dreadful account of your accident, Frank," she said; "and that it all occurred through your helping those disreputable people, the Elwoods, and trying to rescue that girl from some danger. But we were relieved to find that you said nothing of this in your letter. We were glad to know that you were not mixed up in any way with these people again."

"Not even, Laura, though it was for the purpose of saving them, or any of them, from danger or death—very charitable of you, I must say," replied Frank, and laughed somewhat bitterly. "No, I did not meet with my mishap through saving 'that girl,' as you call her, from danger; but I must acknow-

ledge with gratitude that 'that girl' risked her life to save mine. If it had not been for her, I might, before other help arrived, have been burned to death, perhaps, beside the log against which I was thrown and lay stunned."

"I knew it!" his sister exclaimed; "did I not tell you, mother, that this girl was mixed up with it in some way?" and, addressing Frank, she continued, "and, no doubt, out of thankfulness, you then and there, or subsequently, rewarded your fair rescuer—ha, ha, ha!—by making her the offer of your hand and heart, as we heard you had."

"Don't be foolish, Laura," said her mother. "I am sure we should all be grateful to the young person, if she was able to render any assistance to my poor Frank here, under the very trying circumstances. I am sure I owe her a debt of gratitude for what she did. But Frank is not going to allow a feeling of thankfulness to lead him into doing anything rash or foolish; and I am certain he will never do anything to disgrace himself or us."

"Oh, that's right!" Laura answered, with an injured air; "back him up in his infatuation with this designing creature. He isn't the first she has entrapped, I suppose."

"Look here, Laura!" Ashwin said, forgetful of his injuries for the moment, and rising with a jerk that caused him to make a wry face, "I will not hear Miss Elwood's name defamed in this way by you—though you are my sister. I will not, without protest, suffer a word of disparagement to be thrown at her. I did not then and there offer her my hand and heart, as you say—for the reason that I had offered them to her on a previous occasion, and she had refused the honour, as you would call it,"—here Laura laughed incredulously, and he proceeded.—"If her father's name should ever be cleared of the stain—the unmerited stain—that attaches to it, I would follow her to the world's end to make that offer again, for I know that she will never listen to any such proposal till that stain is removed. Now you know all. You said, dear mother, that you did not

think I would do anything to disgrace myself or you. If I could make Miss Elwood my wife, I should not disgrace you. A pure, refined, unselfish, and noble-minded girl for your daughter-in-law could not disgrace you, even though her father had been guilty of all he was charged with and suffered for. I wish you could see her and know her. I do not say that she is too good for you, but I feel that she is too good for me, and immeasurably so for this sister of mine, who would defame her though wholly unknown to her—and who, I am sorry to see, is developing into one of those heartless, artificial, character stabbing, fashionable things, that no sensible man would care to make a wife of. I'll go and find Tom," he added, and walked out.

"Such ingratitude!" Laura said, much offended, and almost giving way to tears; "such dreadful ingratitude, when all I said or did was for his good. Well, I have done with him after this; I only hope he will leave the country with his doxy. It will be disgrace enough even then. I am sure I don't care if ever I set eyes on him again; such base ingratitude, after all I have tried to do for him. A nice errand we have come upon, indeed. Couldn't we start back home again to-night? I don't wish to be another minute in the placee."

"Don't be foolish, Laura," said her mother, "and don't be so bitter against Frank, poor fellow. He was put out, and said things that he didn't mean and will be sorry for. This Miss Elwood is probably in no wise objectionable in herself; but, at any rate, she has refused him, and that is an end to the affair—for which I am thankful. But we must not say anything to excite his anger, or hurt his feelings, in his present dejected state—weak, also, as he is, from his accident."

"Very well, mother," Laura replied, in mock resignation; "I have already said that I will never broach the subject to him again. *His* feelings must not be hurt, poor fellow!—it does not matter how *mine* are wounded. Oh, no! But if you think the—the girl has definitely refused him, you will find

your mistake. Refused him, indeed!—Not likely! She may have checked his too ardent advances—idiot that he is—just in order to make the prize—prize, indeed!—more highly valued when he gains it. She's a designing minx, and that you'll find. But I will say no more—I wash my hands of the business." And Miss Ashwin had recourse for a time to a dignified silence.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE silence continued for a few minutes, and then Laura broke it by remarking :

“ I wonder if Mr. Ponsonby is staying here now. We met him at the Hunt Club ball, you remember, mother.”

“ I remember him,” Mrs. Ashwin replied. “ I thought him very conceited, and—well—rather silly.”

As if in response to Miss Ashwin’s enquiry, there was a knock at the door, and Mr. Ponsonby himself entered.

“ This is a most unexpected pleasure, ladies,” he said in his affected drawl, after he had made his bow and shaken hands ; “ I really could scarcely believe my senses when I heard that the charming Miss Ashwin, and her—a—equally charming mother, had deigned to honour Bloomsbury with their presence. An event of this importance does not often occur to break the monotony of life in this outlandish place ; and I can assure you, ladies, that I highly appreciate the favour you have conferred on us by this visit.”

“ I see that you are still an adept at flattery, Mr. Ponsonby,” Miss Ashwin said, very well pleased at the present time to renew the acquaintance.

“ Upon my word and honour, Miss Ashwin, I never was more sincere in my life,” Ponsonby replied. “ Existence here is generally just an unmitigated bore—as dull as a day of rain ; and the charm of your society breaks in on it, egad ! like a flood of sunshine. Besides,” he added, with his best bow, “ it

would be impossible for me to use flattery where Miss Ashwin is concerned."

"I wonder you stay here if you find it so dull," Mrs. Ashwin remarked. "You are not farming here, or engaged in any other business or profession, are you, Mr. Ponsonby?"

"No," he replied: "not exactly. The fact is, my dear Mrs. Ashwin, I am supposed to be here for the purpose of gaining 'colonial experience,' as it is called. I am supposed to be in the very van of progress here—receiving daily lessons in the rougher and more laborious branches of colonisation—here, where men are hourly engaged in the work of breaking-in the wilderness, and all that sort of thing. I must say I should prefer to let someone else break it in for me. All this, I may mention, with a view to my—a—investing somewhat largely in property by-and-by, so, at least, my governor wishes; and his agent in this country thinks the bush districts offer the best field for youthful enterprise, and—a—advised me to come here. It isn't exactly my ideal as a place of residence. There are other places that would have suited my taste better—near—a—Harefield, for instance, particularly so—where my colonial education would, no doubt, have progressed equally fast and satisfactorily, but one has to give way sometimes to the opinions of one's—a—advisers. And," he added, "for a country place this is a very passable hotel to stay at; and we are not without some little excitement occasionally. We were nearly all burnt out here the other day. Egad! it was particularly warm for a while, I can tell you, ladies; and most deucedly smoky."

"How very unpleasant," remarked Miss Ashwin.

"Deucedly unpleasant, I can assure you. It was only by keeping the doors shut and remaining inside that one was able to 'exist with any comfort.'

"It was through this fire that my son met with his accident," Mrs. Ashwin observed, "it was a pity that he also was not able to keep within closed doors."

"A—yes, to be sure," Ponsonby answered. "But who would not risk life and limb when lovely woman is in danger? Though in Ashwin's case I believe it was lovely woman that rushed to his rescue, in reward, no doubt, for his previous exertions on her behalf. Very romantic altogether, egad! It was, upon my word and honour; and I shouldn't have minded being in his place, if it hadn't been for broken bones, you know, and the—a—confounded smoke. Love-making might be rather trying under the circumstances, though, egad! one would have no difficulty in expressing one's gratitude to the fair deliverer with—a—proper feeling, for the smoke would bring tears to one's eyes, at any rate."

"Oh, pray, do not speak of the deplorable affair at all, Mr. Ponsonby," exclaimed Miss Ashwin, "or of those wretched people. It is very unfortunate that my brother should be under any show of obligation to them, or should have been mixed up with their affairs in any way. I am sure I do not know how Frank could demean himself by associating with them in the slightest degree—it is a positive disgrace. But what a beautiful night it is," she went on, turning and looking out through the half-open French window that led on to the balcony. "The moon is hanging low over the west, and the outline of the wooded range is dimly seen through the smoky haze which thinly, even yet, appears to envelop the landscape ("poetical, by Jove!" thought Ponsonby). How warm it is here, too. Ah, thank you," continued Miss Ashwin, as Ponsonby opened the window and handed her on to the balcony, "it is cooler here," she said, as they strolled along it. "How the lights of the straggling township blend with and relieve the dark background of the bush. Are you an admirer of the beautiful, Mr. Ponsonby? One gets some lovely views in this bush country of yours."

If Ponsonby had been candid, he would have said that he didn't see anything to gush over in the present landscape; and would have admitted that he was unimpressed by scenery,

even the grandest: and it is doubtful if Miss Ashwin herself entertained that rapturous appreciation of the beauties of nature which she, in common with many other young ladies like her, was in the habit of effusively giving expression to.

Ponsonby replied that he simply worshipped the beautiful wherever he saw it; but added: "I don't know that I can take in overmuch of the beautiful at one time, you know—one form of it is enough at a time for me. In the contemplation of one lovely object, I'm, egad! blind to everything else; and in your presence, Miss Ashwin, all other charming things must—a—'pale their ineffectual fires,' you know—upon my soul, they must! There's nothing in them to my mind in comparison."

"What incorrigible flatterers you men are, Mr. Ponsonby," Miss Ashwin answered, by no means offended, "and you yourself one of the worst. How can we poor girls trust you? I am sure I don't believe a word you say when you talk in that strain, Mr. Ponsonby. You have talked in the same way to twenty girls before now, I feel convinced. Ah, no, you must not expect me to think you sincere in what you tell me. I know better than to believe your flattering speeches and fine compliments," she said, and laughed lightly.

"I was never more serious in my life," protested Ponsonby, "upon my word and honour, I never was. Other charms are lost on me when I look on you, Miss Ashwin. You know I have admired you from the first moment I saw you, and I have thought of you more than has been good for my peace of mind, I can assure you I have."

"I really am sorry if your peace of mind has been broken on my account, Mr. Ponsonby," replied Miss Ashwin: "I really am sorry—but I think you will get over it. It will not prove fatal—you will survive—ha, ha, ha!—at least, I hope so."

"Egad ! I'm not so sure of that," Ponsonby said. "I feel more like dying than living at the present moment, since you treat my avowal so lightly. I don't know what the consequences may be—upon my soul, I don't—if you will not smile on me, or give me some little encouragement," he went on, taking her hand, which she allowed him to retain for a moment before she withdrew it, saying :

"Men, we are told, are deceivers ever ; and I am afraid, Mr. Ponsonby, that you are no exception to the rule ; most likely a very dangerous man indeed, making love and breaking hearts right and left. You must prove your sincerity, you know, before you can expect encouragement from anyone. But mother will wonder where we have got to ; and I hear voices. My brothers, I suppose, have come up. We must go in."

"I may come and see you at Harefield, mayn't I ?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "We are always glad to see our friends there ; we are so dull at times, and appreciate pleasant company."

"Well, Laura," said Tom, as they entered the room, "have you been admiring the moonlight ?"

"Yes," Laura answered, "we have no such nights as this down in the open country. There is a peculiar weird aspect about things seen by the light of the young moon through the thin veil of smoke which still hangs over the scene. The effect as viewed from the balcony, as one looks over the intervening township and the dark masses of nearer bush, towards the dim ranges in the distance, is very fine."

"Deuced fine !" said Ponsonby.

Frank was not overpleased at the presence of Ponsonby in company with his sister, and thought to himself: "Laura considers herself disgraced through my intimacy with the Elwoods, but can listen, I expect, without displeasure, to the fulsome flattery and silly compliments of this fellow, who

hasn't a redeeming quality of mind or heart. A mere public-house loafer he would be if his people didn't send him enough money to pay for his board—a man who, if he had to work for his living, would be only fit to clean out a stable or groom a horse, and would do both badly—in whom laziness and self-gratification exclude all sense of duty or of moral obligations. And yet, because he puts on side, and dresses well, and can talk of his expectations and the wealth and high caste of his family, this sister of mine, I suppose, thinks herself honoured by his attentions, or, at least, is evidently not displeased with them. I must let her know something more of him; though, if I speak to her, she will only toss her head and tell me to mind my own concerns, or taunt me with Miss Elwood and my wish to make her my wife. Ah, Maud! dear girl—it would be sacrilege to speak of you and Ponsonby in the same breath. I shall tell mother what I know of the fellow."

And this Ashwin accordingly did on the following morning. But his mother made light of his fears.

"You need not have any anxiety about Laura," she said. "She will not allow her affections to be engaged, or commit herself in any way, before there is a definite and unmistakeable prospect of a suitable position and establishment placed before her; and these I think Mr. Ponsonby is not likely to have at his disposal for some considerable time to come. The young man may be all you say, but there seems no doubt that he is well-connected, and is perhaps no worse than a good many other young fellows of his class, who have been used to lead indolent and purposeless lives, which are open to many temptations. I certainly, however, have not a high opinion of Mr. Ponsonby, and shall give him no encouragement to become intimate with us. But if he expects to amuse himself by making love to Laura, I fancy she is likely to derive as much amusement out of the affair as he is—probably a great deal more. Her heart is not going to run away with her

reason, or lead her into any difficult or awkward position. Ah, Frank!" she added, "I am not so sure about yours. I am afraid it is too easily led captive, poor boy."

"Not a bit of it, mother," Frank replied. "If you could only see and become acquainted with Miss Elwood you would not blame me for falling in love with her. But if Laura's heart doesn't lead her into folly—and I don't believe that it is at all likely to do so—her vanity may; and I hope you will keep a watchful eye upon her, and give her a word of caution against Ponsonby."

Ashwin was, no doubt, sincerely careful to guard his sister's happiness; but he doubtless also felt considerable satisfaction in being able to express disapproval of any intimacy on her part with Ponsonby, and to raise a voice of warning against the probable consequences—to pay her back in her own coin, in fact. We are always pleased to be able to lecture the lecturer, to admonish the monitor, to find the weak or tender spot in the censor of our failings and to put our finger upon it, to warn the warner, to counsel in return the self-constituted counsellor; especially so when we think, as we are too apt to do, that the efforts put forth for our welfare are uncalled for and out of place.

Frank's wish that his mother should see Miss Elwood was gratified sooner than he anticipated. Early in the forenoon—when the Ashwin's were about to start on the return journey, but were assembled as yet in the sitting-room upstairs, with the exception of Tom, who had gone round to the stables to order the horses out—Elwood's buggy drove up to the hotel, and the old man got out and entered with the intention of making personal enquiries after Ashwin's state of health, leaving his daughter and Ted in the buggy. He was shown into the room, but, when he saw the ladies, would have retired again at once, had not Frank prevented him.

"This is my mother—Mr. Elwood—and my sister."

Mrs. Ashwin bowed graciously enough; but Laura's

acknowledgement was of the stiffest and coldest, and was followed, after a hard stare, by her turning her back on the visitor and walking out on the balcony.

“Had I known that you were not alone, but in the company of members of your family, I should not have intruded upon you at this time, Mr. Ashwin,” the old man said. “I called to assure myself, personally, that the report which previous enquiries yielded could indeed be relied upon, and that your accident was not likely to be attended with lasting or serious results.”

Ashwin assured him that his injuries were not serious, and that he hoped to be all right again in a few weeks.

“Your son’s accident, madam,” continued Elwood, addressing Mrs. Ashwin, “was, indeed, mainly consequent on his exertions on my behalf; for, had he not hastened to our aid in the first instance, he would not have had to make the attempt to return which led to that accident. It was his foresight and help that saved my sheep, or many of them, from destruction, and probably, indeed, my house also. This but adds to the many and heavy obligations to Mr. Ashwin under which I rest, and which I can never hope, even in the slightest degree, to repay.”

“At most only a little neighbourly kindness,” ejaculated Frank. “Any neighbour would do the same for another.”

Mr. Elwood was taking his departure, but Mrs. Ashwin stopped him by saying:

“The obligation is not all on your side, Mr. Elwood. I believe when my son met with his accident, it was your daughter’s courage and presence of mind—so my son says—that saved him from further injuries, or even from a terrible death. You must allow a mother to express her feelings also on this occasion, and I desire you to convey my thanks to Miss Elwood, and my grateful appreciation of what she then did.”

“My daughter is below,” replied Mr. Elwood, “and I

will take your kind message to her. She was, I believe, the first to render some assistance, however little, to your son, and, perhaps, ran some risk in doing so."

"If she is here, I will take the privilege of thanking her in person," said Mrs. Ashwin, who, not unfavourably impressed with the old man, was perhaps glad of the opportunity of seeing and speaking with the girl to whom her son had given his heart.

Miss Ashwin appeared at this moment from the balcony, and announced that the buggy had driven round, and was waiting for them at the door.

When they reached the street, Ashwin went forward eagerly to greet Miss Elwood, and then introduced his mother.

A warm blush overspread the young girl's features for a moment at the unexpected meeting, but recovering herself on the instant, she met the elder lady's advances with a gentle, lady-like composure which was not lost on Mrs. Ashwin, who, in spite of what she may have heard relative to Miss Elwood, could not fail to be favourably impressed by the sweet, thoughtful face and truthful eyes into which she looked.

"I heard from your father that you were here," she said, and I am glad to take the opportunity of expressing my gratitude to you for what you so bravely underwent in order to help my poor Frank here when he was in danger. I trust you yourself have not suffered in health through your exertions on that fearful night."

Miss Elwood assured her that no ill effects had resulted, and made light indeed of what she had done, adding, "Till other help arrived, I thought my feeble assistance might, perhaps, be of some avail. One could not think of another injured, it might be, and in danger, without putting forth some little effort in relief, unavailing though it might have been."

"You are a brave girl, nevertheless," Mrs. Ashwin replied. "How many under similar circumstances would have remained

helplessly inactive, terrified out of all power to render help, and wanting in your presence of mind! Your father and you are leaving here, I understand—or have some intention of doing so—I shall never see you again, probably, but accept my best wishes for your welfare. I must go now—our horses appear to be restive. Good-bye. I am glad to have seen you, so that I might thank you."

Miss Ashwin had not taken the slightest notice of the old man as they descended to the street, and when they had reached it, she had passed the Elwood's trap, giving the occupant of it her haughtiest stare; and, mounting to the buggy, and taking the reins from Tom, had intimated to him that she would drive. She now showed the utmost impatience at her mother's delay, tightening the reins, and flicking the horses with the whip, causing them to start forward, and then suddenly checking them again.

"Look out, Laura," said Tom, as he went to the horses' heads. "You'll have Troubadour playing up, you know he won't stand much of that sort of treatment. Whoa, old man!"

"Ah, Miss Ashwin," said Mr. Ponsonby, who just then came out, "this is too deuced bad—upon my word and honour it is. Is Bloomsbury to suffer an eclipse so soon after the sun has risen on it?—an eclipse, egad! plunged in black sepulchral night it will be to some of us when your presence is withdrawn."

"I shall not be sorry to leave it for some reasons, Mr. Ponsonby," she replied. "I cannot conceive what my mother can have to say to these low people. They really presume too much. They should remember what they are, and have been. Ah, she is coming now. Good-bye, Mr. Ponsonby."

"*Adieu* and *au revoir*. We shall meet again before long. Mrs. Ashwin," he continued, addressing that lady who just then came up, "one is tempted to use the strongest terms of disapproval at your short stay and sudden departure. Had

you and Miss Ashwin left our humble township unvisited, we then might have continued our wretched existence here without murmuring, but when we have once tasted the delights of your society, this sudden deprivation is—a—too deuced bad, in fact."

Mrs. Ashwin laughed, and said she hoped no serious consequences would follow to the people of Bloomsbury, and her daughter added :

" You will survive the shock of our departure, Mr. Ponsonby. The softening influence of time will lighten the affliction—ha, ha, ha ! If we thought any fatal effects were likely to follow our prolonged absence from Bloomsbury, we might promise to return; or, in your case, perhaps a visit to Harefield might bring about a recovery."

" Egad, I believe it would, if I was on the verge of the grave even. I only wish I was going with you now."

" There is a spare seat in the buggy," Miss Ashwin said.

" By Jove !" Ponsonby exclaimed, "*that* would be delightful!"

But Mrs. Ashwin did not second the invitation implied, and discreetly appeared unconscious of it; and after further leave-taking, and a parting admonition to Frank from his mother to be careful of himself, and a promise on his part to visit them soon, they drove off, Miss Ashwin handling the reins in a familiar and most efficient style.

" A devilish fine girl," Ponsonby said to himself, as he watched the retreating buggy; " a devilish fine girl, and one that would make a creditable life-partner for any man —though, egad, I believe she would want to keep the driver's seat and the whip hand in the matrimonial chariot."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IT is time that the reader should look in upon O'Byrne and his mates. With them, indeed, little had transpired lately worthy of record. An extension of the business had taken place, it is true. Dennis had found another customer for the manufactured article in a countryman of his own, Pat Regan by name, who kept a hostelry about twelve miles from Bloomsbury, in "the rising township of Swimborough." Regan's house was as yet the only habitation in the township; and as it was built on some of the highest ground there, the water was never known to be more than two feet deep in the bar, even during the highest floods of the river which ran near. The house stood at the junction of two district roads, and as a good deal of settlement was just then taking place in the neighbourhood, and the bush was coming down fast, Regan found the situation for the time a fairly lucrative one.

Though the township had not been built upon, and most of it still lay in standing bush, yet nearly all the sections in it had been sold. The sale had taken place in Wellington, after having been well advertised in glowing terms, in which the capitalist, the speculator, and all classes of the community were invited to participate in the good things about to be offered—to avail themselves of the opportunity of a lifetime, and invest in Swimborough town sections, the possession of any of which, one was led to believe, meant an assured fortune.

O'Byrne and the old black mare made several nocturnal trips to Regan's; and Davie had made the journey more than once on foot, but he was beginning to object to this mode of doing business.

"He didna see why he couldna ride on horseback as weel as ither folk; an' he'd be d——d if he wad hump ony mair whisky to Swimborough on Shanks's powny. He didna mind steppin' doon to Bloomsbury in the cool o' the evenin' wi' a swag o' it, but Regan's was ower far. He might juist as weel be on the wallaby amang the stations again—an', when a' was said an' done, it mebbe wasna the waur life o' the twa."

The truth was, Davie was growing somewhat discontented. The life he was now leading did not come up to what he had expected from it. His experience was only that which is common to mankind. How rarely does the fruition fulfil the promise—the reality equal the anticipation! The Will-o'-the-wisp still eludes our pursuit; but we will follow it to the end.

Davie had found that there was more work expected of him at times than he cared to perform. Some further bush-falling had been done in order to comply with the conditions under which O'Byrne held his section, but the work had been put off till almost too late in the season, when the mosquitos in swarms attacked those engaged in the felling. Davie had held most decided objections to work under the circumstances, and it was only on cool or windy days, when these summer pests of the bush were comparatively quiet, that he had consented to use the axe, and then only on the smaller timber.

"The land's no mine," he said to himself, "that I should burst mysel' chappin' doon trees; an' its ower risky wark—a man's life's no' safe at it. That auld de'il o' a Dan-naethin' wad please him better than to drap a tree on tap o' me, I'm thinkin'—but he'll no get the chance."

Indeed, the work as a whole would not have borne strict inspection; for even O'Byrne himself was indifferent as to whether it was done well or ill, or whether the "burn" should be good or bad, and had hurried over it, anxious only to get the prescribed area down.

This had been done, and the bush was now burned. It was lit on the afternoon of the gale; and when the fire spread through the long grass and dry timber in the direction of the wharé, and threatened it, all hands were out combating the danger.

Davie had carried a few buckets of water and thrown them over the wharé and over a heap of cocksfoot straw which lay near the back of it, and from which some seed had only lately been threshed. But he did not care, even then, to exert himself overmuch, and seemed to think that his forte lay more in directing and supervising operations than in putting forth much manual labour on his own part.

"Lay intil it, Dan," he called out to that worthy, who, begrimed with smoke and surrounded by fire, was trying to beat out encroaching flames in the long grass — "lay intil it, ye auld de'il; ecod, ye wad mak' a gran' leeftenant to auld Clootie himsel'. I'm thinkin', Dennis, anither bucket or twa o' water on thae logs oot by there wadna be amiss."

"Then why the h—— don't ye go and do it, instid av standin' there like a drill-sargent?" yelled O'Byrne, who was trying to prevent the stab fence that enclosed the garden from catching fire. "Don't ye see I'm busy here? If the wharé goes, an' the tucker with it, it'll be yersilf that'll be the first to call out!"

Old Dan muttered some fierce imprecation between his teeth.

The greatest danger was at length averted. The patch of cultivated ground at the back of the wharé, and at one side of it, protected it in a great measure; but within the

same enclosure, the fire had swept through the rough cocksfoot grass from which the seed had been cut, and the many logs and stumps were still burning fiercely. O'Byrne and the others sat up till morning, or till the wind dropped and the rain began to fall, in order to keep watch and use preventive measures lest the wharé should again be endangered by a fresh outbreak of fire.

Whisky was freely indulged in, and high words were exchanged once or twice between Davie and O'Byrne—a challenge by the latter to go outside and try conclusions with fists was, however, not accepted.

“Gie me a fair field an’ nae favour, an’ I’ll haud ye at fisticuffs till ye’re sick o’ it, my bonnie man,” Davie said—“but it’s no’ here that I can look for that, wi’ naebody by but yer d——d auld Vandemonian uncle—or whatever he may be to ye—at yer back. I’ll meet ye on ony ither grund, though—wi’ somebody alongside to see fair play.”

“Any ground ye like, me boy. It’s the greatest plisure in life it’ll give me to dress ye down,” Dennis replied.

Old Dan was as taciturn as usual, though he took his share of the whisky. The fiery spirit which had excited the passions of the others appeared to have no such effect upon him; but when Davie called him an old Vandemonian, a demoniacal gleam overspread his grim features for a moment, and shone from his evil eyes.

In the morning, after a late breakfast, O'Byrne caught his horse, and prepared to start for the township, with the intention of enjoying himself there in the congenial atmosphere of the Cosmopolitan, or in the sweet solace which love and Molly's presence might afford. He was a good-natured fellow on the whole, and not inclined to bear malice or keep a grudge for long, and, when leaving, he called out to Davie, who had stretched himself again on his bunk :

“Good-bye to ye, Davie, me boy ; we'll be afther forgettin' all we said last night—not but if ye have a moind to have it out, be the powers, ye've only to name time an' place, an' I'll be there—down in Jacob's back yard if that would plaze ye best. But we'll be afther puttin' it down to the whisky, an' say no more about it—not but a good lambastin' might do ye no harm, an' take some of the laziness out of ye.”

“I'll think it ower,” said Davie. “I'm sure I'm no' ane to keep illwull, an' can forget an' forgi'e as wullenly as ony man.”

The truth was, Davie was not anxious to try conclusions with O'Byrne in the manner suggested, for Dennis was handy with his fists, and being of an active and sinewy build, would probably have been able, as he once told Davie, to “walk round him like a cooper round a cask.”

O'Byrne departed, and Davie spent the most of the forenoon in bed, where he cogitated deeply what his future course had better be. He was becoming dissatisfied with his manner of life here, and was longing for a change. The love of his former wandering life had returned, and was growing strong within him. The novelty of his present occupation and surroundings had worn off, and the drawbacks were being more and more felt. The occasional trips which he made to the Cosmopolitan did, indeed, afford an agreeable change, but he was beginning to find his sojourn on O'Byrne's section on the whole anything but pleasant.

“I hae been used to mair society,” he said to Brasch on one occasion, when speaking on the subject ; “there was aye a cheerfu' evenin' to be spent on a station, an' aftener than no', gude company on the road. O'Byrne's richt enoo',” he went on, “but he's gey aften awa' frae hame ; an' nae company's better than Auld Dan's—ye dinna want vinegar wi' yer victuals when he's at the table.”

With O'Byrne he could generally get along smoothly enough, though latterly some outbreaks of feeling, as on the previous evening, had taken place between them. But between him and Old Dan there had from the first been strong mutual antipathy, and he could see more plainly each day that the old man's hatred of him was intense. When Dan spoke to him now, which was but seldom, it was with an imprecation, or to utter some stinging jibe. Davie was pretty thick-skinned, and it took a good deal of rough usage or hard language to make much impression on him ; but his dislike to Old Dan had been gaining strength, and it now included in a measure O'Byrne also, of whom at times he was in some bodily fear.

He ruminated long over the matter as he lay on his bunk. At last he jumped up, saying :

“Ecod ! I’ll dae it. An’ they can blame naebody but themselves.”

Davie thereupon, after first helping himself liberally from the whisky jar, began to busy himself in evident preparations for departure. He gathered together his blankets and other belongings, and rolling all up with well-accustomed dexterity into a neat and handy swag, awaited the boiling of the tea-billy and the cooking of some potatoes, which he had placed on the replenished fire.

“It’s an auld sayin’ that prayer an’ provender never yet hindered ony ane on a journey,” he said to himself. “I canna’ mebbe speak wi’ much experience aboot the prayer, but I’m able—nane better—to uphaul the truth o’ it respectin’ the provender.”

He had just finished his meal when Old Dan returned. Dan had been back at the whisky-still, or had been employing himself somewhere on the clearing, and Davie had seen nothing of him since O'Byrne left.

“Be the powers,” he said in his hard voice as he came in, “it’s a nick in the post I’ll be afther puttin’—the billy boiled

and the praties cooked. But, faith, it's the only work ye have any relish for, is getting ready the tucker; and ye won't do that same itself, av ye can lave it to somebody else, till hunger drives ye to it—bad luck to yer lazy carcass and greedy guts—it's the wan is the only thing that'll make the other exart itself."

"Haud yer tongue, ye limb o' the de'il," Davie replied, rising and picking up his swag, "haud yer tongue, an' keep yer venomous auld breath to cool yer parritch wi'. But I needna' quarrel wi' ye noo when I'm pairtin' wi' ye, an' it's ower thankfu' I'll be to see the last o' ye this day—the last o' ye, am I sayin'?—ecod; mebbe no, for when you're gaun to be hanged—as I ha' sma' doot ye wull be—I wad gang fifty miles to see ye dance on the ticht-rope. But I'm leavin' ye noo, an' we needna' pairt ill freends. I'm leavin' ye for guid an' a', an' that's news that'll gi'e ye pleasure, I'm thinkin'."

"Och! sure an' ye'll lave us a lock av yer hair afore ye go, won't ye now?" Dan said, mockingly. "But ye're leavin' us, are ye? An' what's the manin' av yer takin' yersilf aff in sich a hurry, all at wanst now. Faith, an' it's no good yer asther, I'll be bound—it's no good ye're asther—do ye mind me now?"

Dan was more voluble than was usual with him, and seemed bent on a quarrel.

"It's ower lang I ha'e been here," Davie answered, as he walked outside and laid his swag for a moment on a bench there, while Old Dan followed him. "I'm thinkin' I hae been ower lang here whaur honest folk ha'e sma' richt to be—an' sae I'm juist leavin' ye."

"Ye come like a snake (sneak), and ye'll go like a snake," Old Dan replied with an oath. "It's informer ye'll be asther turnin' now, isn't it, sure?" and he laughed a mocking laugh, edging nearer the other, and taking a hurried glance around. "Ye're too honest a man to be defraudin' the rivinie, and

ye'll be for bringin' the police on us, that's what ye'll be afther doin', isn't it, now, and be gettin' a reward, faith, for that same?"

"I'll no' dae that—I'll no' be daein' that," replied Davie, hurriedly. "De'il tak' the information I'll gi'e," he went on. "I *wull* say ye ha'en'a been vera freendly or ower ceevil to me since I cam' here, an' no' likely to be, an' sae we may as weel pairt, an' I'll just gang awa' back to the tramp again. But de'il tak' the information I'll gi'e," he repeated, as he turned to pick up his swag. "Though if the hale business wad be publichshed by the morrow's morn, it wad, mebbe, only serve ye richt."

"Publichsh it in hell, then," Old Dan hissed, as, drawing the knife from its sheath on his hip, he sprang forward, and ere Davie could raise a hand to defend himself or leap aside, struck him through the heart.

One gasp and groan was all poor Davie uttered as he fell.

The murderer, waiting only to cast another anxious look around, dragged the body to the baek of the wharé, and concealed it under the heap of cocksfoot straw which Davie himself had damped with water on the previous evening. He little thought when doing so that his dead body would lie under it before another sun had set. Alas for the shortsightedness of poor humanity!

Davie's swag was carried round and hidden in the same place. Dan then proceeded to efface all traces of the deed. Blood marks were removed, and hot ashes or fresh earth strewn over them. Then, after a long swig from the whisky jar, Old Dan sat down to his dinner, which he seemed to relish with appetite undiminished and unaffected by the terrible incident which had just taken place, and in which he had been the chief actor. And afterwards, during the afternoon, as he sat on a hinaú log outside the door and smoked his pipe, his hard-set features gave little evidence

of the working of the evil mind within. A furtive glance once or twice in the direction in which the body of the murdered man lay, and the persistent watch which he kept on the track leading to the outer world, as far as it was visible to him, were the only signs which told of uneasiness or anxiety.

But visitors to O'Byrne's section were rare. There were no settlers beyond it, or in the vicinity of it; and, in the direction of the township, it was nearly two miles to the first clearing or habitation. Dan's chief concern was lest O'Byrne himself should return for some reason sooner than anticipated; but he judged, and judged rightly, that Dennis would make a stay in the township of a night or two at least. There was, however, always a degree of uncertainty about the latter's movements, and Dan's great anxiety was lest his mate should unexpectedly return.

But his solitude remained unbroken, and as soon as night fell he began to busy himself about the burial of his victim. Behind the wharé, in the potato plot, where some of the early crop had been already dug, was the spot he selected for the grave. The top soil he carefully placed on one side, to be again replaced on the top when his awful work was finished; but the chocolate loam was deep, and the subsoil even, for a considerable depth, differed but little in colour or appearance from the soil on the surface.

Old Dan laboured unremittingly at his work, and silently, save when a muttered curse broke from him. His task was at length so far completed—deep and long and wide enough the hole which he had made seemed to be for its purpose. With difficulty he drew himself out of it, and then, dragging the body to the edge, he rolled it in. But first he rifled the pockets of what money they contained, and even appropriated a stick of tobacco which he found

in one of them; for Old Dan was of a frugal habit in his way, and careful that nothing should be needlessly wasted. Davie's swag was flung in also; that swag which had been carried over many a far-away lonely track, which had been flung off in the men's quarters of many a distant station, where its colour and outline was almost as well-known as its owner was, at last found a permanent resting-place. The well-worn Tam-o'-Shanter cap was also thrown in, and lay near the head it had so often covered. Old Dan then filled in the earth, ramming it tightly with a wooden rammer, round and over the body, and thence to the surface, so as to guard as much as possible against any subsequent subsidence exciting suspicion as to what might lie beneath. The potato stalks, which had previously strewn the ground, were again scattered over it, and the work was finished.

The night was now very dark. At first, as Old Dan laboured at his task, a young moon had looked aslant upon him from above the tree tops in the west, but it had now set, and heavy clouds had come up. A rising wind moaned dismally through the bush near by, and through the branches of some dead trees which still stood in the clearing, and which, just dimly visible against the sombre sky, looked spectre-like and weird. As Old Dan turned and walked towards the wharé a "mopoke" owl that had settled on the ridge of it, and had been uttering at intervals its mournful cry, shrieked and flew away. A superstitious dread for a moment laid its hold upon the murderer, and with a scared look behind him, he hurried into the doorway and struck a light. The light and a deep draught of whisky re-assured him, and he could then even laugh grimly at his momentary fears. He afterwards went back and fired the heap of cocksfoot straw. It had been damped only on the outside on the previous evening and now burned brightly; and as Dan with a long stick tossed up the flaming mass and piled it heavily

on the particular spot in which the body had for a time lain, the gaunt tree-tops, the miserable hut and its surroundings, and the fiend-like features of the old man were lit up in clear distinctness. The last trace of the deed was effaced.

The murder was never made public. When O'Byrne returned to the wharé two days afterwards, he was surprised to find that Davie was not there, and made enquiries about him from Dan.

“ Didn’t ye see anything av him in the township beyant? ” the latter replied. “ Sure an’ he left the very day ye did yersilf, but late—near dark it was. An’ so ye niver sot eyes on him. Begorra, it’s the fear av death ye wor afther puttin’ into him that mornin’, by the same token, whin ye axed him to meet ye down below an’ have it out wid ye, av he was afeard to stand up to ye here. Faith an’ he tould me he wud go aff on the wallaby agin, an’ divil a longer put up wid yer bouncin’ an’ bullyraggin’—an’, faith, I didn’t ax him twice to stop, for it’s a good riddance av he’s gone intoirely.”

O’Byrne expressed his fear that Davie, going off as he was supposed to have done, might inform against them, and bring the police down on the whisky-still, and suggested that the plant and material should at once be removed and hidden in some place of concealment in the bush; and to this suggestion Old Dan made at first a show of cordial assent, but afterwards ventured the opinion that they might safely leave things as they were, for, said he, “ It’s a couple of days or more since he wint, an’ av he was goin’ to split on us, he wud have done it the very minit he got to the township. Dipind on it, he’s aff on the wallaby agin, an’ the divil a more we’ll hear av him.”

And so the contents of the cave were left undisturbed.

O’Byrne visited the township again on the following morning for the purpose of making enquiries from Brasch or others

as to whether Davie had been seen during the past two or three days. He could hear no tidings of him, Jacob had not seen him.

"Mein Gott!" he whispered to Dennis, as they sat by themselves in the little back room, "vas you sure he vill have gone at all."

"What do ye mane?" queried Dennis.

"Vell, vell," replied the other, "von does not know vat to belief. Vy did he not call and see me, I vonders? And vat moneys had he? He vould vant moneys, von would belief, to say nodings and for his share of de pusiness."

O'Byrne replied that he believed Davie had a few pounds, and that his reason for not calling at the Cosmopolitan might have been his fear of a renewal of the quarrel between them, about which Dennis made no reservation, and reminded Brasch that Davie had been growing discontented of late, and had often spoken of going back to his old rambling life.

"Ah, vell," said Jacob, musingly, "time vill tell."

But time did not solve the mystery to his mind, yet if he entertained any suspicions of foul play, he discreetly kept them to himself. He did not think that O'Byrne was guilty of any deceit in the matter, but, truth to tell, as the days passed and nothing was seen or heard of Davie, he began to have doubts about the innocence of Old Dan. But to have given expression to his suspicions would have led to other disclosures which it was to his interest to avoid, and he remained silent.

On Davie's old beat—among the companions of his class whom he had met and associated with in his wanderings, among the station hands and station managers in both islands, by whom the cessation of his periodical visits had come to be talked about and regarded as strange—many conjectures were hazarded as to what had become of Scottie, Scotch Davie, Davie Dunlop, the sundowner. It was reported,

indeed, that he had gone into the bush country "up north," and, again, that he had died in the hospital in Christchurch, but his true fate and last resting place remained unrevealed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

O'BURNE did not find that Dan's temper improved at all with the absence of Davie. On the contrary, the old man became, if possible, more morose and cantankerous than before. Occasionally, indeed, when well primed with whisky, which he now seemed fonder of, and partook of to excess more frequently, he would indulge in bursts of fiendish hilarity, and would dance and caper in outrageous mockery of merriment, giving vent the while to obscene and blasphemous profanity.

But he kept his secret. No word he uttered, at least, in his waking hours, could arouse suspicion as regards that which was rarely absent from his thoughts. The terrible proximity of the potato plot and of what lay beneath it began to have an effect on even the iron nerves and callous feelings of Old Dan. Though his hardened nature was proof against all approach of pity or remorse, or even of the dread of retributive justice, yet it was not wanting in superstitious fears. Had the buried body been but a mile away, he could have borne with the thought of it unmoved, but the persistent presence of it so near him, both by day and night, was beginning to be felt even by him. In the dark, especially during the after-effects of a more than usually severe drinking-bout, he did not care to pass the spot where his victim lay, and if he came to the door of the wharé after nightfall, he was apt to cast a scared look in that direction. Impelled,

on the one hand, to keep watch and guard over the fateful spot, on the other, the inclination grew strong within him to get away from it, if only for a day or two; and at length he went down to the Cosmopolitan to seek the relief which a brief sojourn there might afford. But he did not like the scrutinising way in which Brasch eyed him, and felt uneasy under his glances; and when that individual came quietly behind him as he lounged by himself in the doorway on the evening of his arrival, and whispered, "Vat did you do mit Davie?" Dan started, and then turned savagely on his questioner with an oath and a look in his eyes that made Jacob hastily retreat a step or two.

"What the ——— do I know about him?" he answered. "Didn't he lave the wharé beyant an' come down this way? It's yersilf that mebbe knows more about him than I do, I'm tellin' ye now. It wouldn't do for ye, now, av he brought the pelice on ye, ye know what for. Faith, an' ye'd have more to lose than ayther av us, so be after kapin' yer tongue quate, me boy. Av the Scotch h—— has gone off on his travels ag'in, sure an' it'll hurt nayther me nor you."

"I vill hope he vill not have travelled on his long journey, dat is all," Brasch said, as he turned and went into the bar.

Though no further mention was made of Davie's disappearance, Dan did not feel quite at home during his stay at the Cosmopolitan, and did not make it a long one. He drank more deeply, however, than was usual with him when away from home, and spent his money more freely than was his wont. Later in the evening when several fellows had come in, he shouted for all hands in the room, took a hand at a game of euchre, and became, for him, noisy and talkative, though somewhat quarrelsome at times.

On the following forenoon, as he strolled down to the other end of the township, he came upon Frank Ashwin, who was standing in front of one of the principal stores

in company with M'Keown, who had also come in on some business of his employer's.

Ashwin had now nearly recovered from the effects of his accident. Old Dan had heard of it, and gloated over it with many a malediction and muttered wish that worse had befallen; for the sting of the stock-whip still rankled in his vindictive breast, and he vowed to himself that he would some day wipe out that score. He now leered at Ashwin as he approached, and stopped on coming near. He had already taken two or three whiskies during the morning, and feeling, besides, at more than usual enmity with the world, was disposed to vent his spite on some object, and could not resist the impulse to accost Ashwin, whom he so cordially hated.

"An' how's yer honour this mornin', Mr. Ashwin? an' how did ye lave yer frind the ould convict, an' his lovely daughter, eh? Have ye married her yit? O be the powers," he went on, "ye wud niver be afther doin' that same widout axin' me to the weddin'—all the ould frinds av the family will be there that day for sartin, mesilf among them in a sate av honour."

"Be off, you old scoundrel. It is perhaps as well that I haven't a stock-whip handy, or I would lift your hide with it again," Ashwin said, with rising anger, as he turned and walked into the store, anxious to get rid of the undesirable presence of Old Dan, and prevent further words of insult.

"I haven't forgot the stock-whip, ye b——," Dan said; and then he laughed mockingly and called out, "Och, ye're a purty man, a swate gintleman, intoirely—an' ye'll not forgit to ax me to the weddin'—an ould frind av the family, ye know—faix, an' mebbe it's wanted I'll be to give the bride hersilf away, av the ould man shouldn't feel up to it." And Dan took a few steps forward, moving as if he had someone on his arm.

"Look here, you imp of the devil," said Maurice, coming up to him—"you satellite of Satan, double-distilled old villain—old Vandemonian and cheat-the-gallows that you are, that ought to have kicked at a rope's-end long ago, or else your face belies you—if you speak another vile word I'll knock you down."

"Who the h—— are you, that I mustn't spake?" Dan asked savagely. "Av it's knockin' down ye're talkin' about, I'll drop ye wid this," and he raised menacingly the heavy stick that he carried. But before he could bring it down on the head of M'Keown, if such had been his intention, the latter sprang in upon him, and seizing his descending arm by the wrist twisted it backward, and exerting his great strength, with adroit movement of foot and disengaged hand, landed Old Dan on the broad of his back on the road, his stick meanwhile having been jerked out of his grasp.

"Lie there, you old villain," said Maurice quietly, "and let it be a warning to you to pass decent people by when you meet them without opening that foul mouth of yours."

But Dan was tough and active for his age, and now, blind with passion and vindictive fury, and regardless for the moment of all consequences, he jumped to his feet, and drawing his knife made a desperate lunge at his opponent. But M'Keown was again too quick for him, and, narrowly escaping a wound, leaped aside and at the same time dealt Dan such a blow on the side of the head as stretched him senseless.

"I hope I haven't killed you right out," he said, with some anxiety. "You're too old a man for me to strike, but when knives are out one can't very well stand on scruples."

By this time several people had collected, and Ashwin, who had again come out, remonstrated with Maurice for

having any quarrel with such a man. But he himself, however, felt keenly the insult offered to Miss Elwood through having her name uttered in foul jest by such a one as Dan, and was not, perhaps, sorry to see him prostrate in the road.

Dan now showed some signs of returning animation. Maurice picked up the knife which the relaxed grasp of its owner had let fall.

"An ugly weapon it is in the hands of such a cut-throat," he said, as he examined its long, keen blade and finely-sharpened point; "and I'll send it where it will be out of his reach and lie harmless for a while," and he flung it across the road and some way down a vacant section there, to where, at a bend of the shallow gully that traversed the township, a piece of raupo swamp lay; but no "arm, clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful," caught and "drew under in the mere" Old Dan's Excalibur.

Meanwhile, Dan had recovered consciousness and was making an effort to gain his feet.

"Lie still," said Maurice; "lie still, old catamountain, till I talk to you; but don't utter a word, or I'll gag you with your own cudgel here, and hand you over to Constable O'Flaherty if he's about, or tie you to this horse-post and let the boys make a cockshy of you till he comes, or I'll walk you down to the lock-up myself. You would do murder, would you? If one tries to stop your foul breath from polluting God's air, you would draw the knife and do murder, would you, you old hyæna? Now, up you get—I'd lift you by the scruff of the neck and set you on your feet again, but I've really an objection to touch you if I can help it. It's to prison you ought to go for this, but I'd rather not be put to the trouble of appearing against you—so you can go now, my picture of benevolence; but on the understanding,

mind you, that when you walk the streets of this township, you'll only speak when you're spoken to, and then in a low voice and civil tone. I'll see you on your way a bit, just out of the crowd; and, maybe, give you a little advice in private, if I could think it would do you any good. Pick up your stick."

Dan picked it up and walked sullenly off towards the Cosmopolitan, accompanied for a little way by M'Keown, but whatever his feelings may have been, he uttered not a word. After the other had departed from him, however, and returned to the store, Dan faced round, and by the movement of his lips was seen to be speaking to himself.

"He's asking a blessing on us now and making a vow that he'll turn over a new leaf," Maurice said, with a laugh.

Had he listened to the dreadful vow registered by Old Dan he might not have laughed so lightly, nor would the sweet slumbers of pretty Mary Robinson have been unbroken for many a night had it reached her ears, for Old Dan's hatred was now turned into a new channel, and the latest object of it—this man who had mastered and cowed him and held him up to ridicule should, he intended, be the first to feel his vengeance.

Dan returned home the same afternoon with temper, as O'Byrne found, not at all improved by his visit to Bloomsbury. But his eye brightened and a grim smile played on his hard features as he took down and examined the rifle which he was in the habit of using in his hunting expeditions.

"The wild cattle have come over to this side ag'in," Dennis remarked. "I heard thim bellowin' last night not far off. Ye'll be thinkin' av havin' a shot at thim ag'in, Dan. Faith, an' it's out av mate we'll be afore long."

Dan acquiesced, and said he would give the rifle "a bit av a clane," as it would be all the better for it.

It has been said that Dan, in his intercourse with

O'Byrne, allowed no word to escape him that could tend to arouse suspicion in the mind of the latter relative to the dreadful end that had overtaken Davie. But in Old Dan's confused mutterings whilst asleep on the night following his return from the township, O'Byrne heard enough to startle him, and cause him to sit up in his bunk with the perspiration breaking on his brow.

"Holy Virgin!" he whispered as he listened, "could there have been foul play?"

But he could hear nothing additional to give further light or assurance. Dan's thoughts had taken a new turn, and he muttered savagely of stock-whips and number thirty-seven, and then laughed mockingly in his sleep.

"It's only drames," O'Byrne said to himself—"drames that come to us in quare shapes in spite av ourselves, an' flit an' flutter through the head like birds in the top av a tree, that sing or scraigh as the fancy takes them."

But he was not altogether at ease; and, besides, he had become somewhat dissatisfied of late. Old Dan, as a companion, was getting each day more objectionable, and the prospect in front of Dennis did not give promise of much happiness. How could he expect Molly to share his life here? Whisky-making might be an easy way of gaining money, but the money seemed to slip away just as easily. He found that he was no better off at the end of the year than he was at the beginning. There was, of course, a certain charm about the life to one of his rollicking disposition, but it was beginning to pall with him, and after all there was not so much profit in the business as he had expected. Brasch really had the best of it, for the price he paid for the manufactured article was very low, while he was able to retail it at the usual price.

Dennis, after much thought as he lay awake, made up his mind to offer the section and his share of the whisky still to Brasch at a low figure, and clear out.

"Ye can have it," he said to Brasch—for he went off specially on the following morning to see him on the subject—"Ye can have it at purty well yer own figure. You an' Dan can work the thing between ye aisily enough, an' do a bit av trade with Pat Regan as well."

But Jacob would not entertain the idea at all.

"Mein Gott!" he said, holding up his hands with a frightened look, real or assumed; "mein Gott! I vould not take it at no price at all mit only Old Dan in it. I vould not, Dennis, I tell you sure, mit no ones but him. Ah, no, Dennis, mein boy; you must not tink of leaving us like dat. Ve could not do mitout you. Ve vill make de pusiness grow more big, und bring in de sponduliks like nodings. Ve hab not got Davie to share mit now. I vill still vonder," he added, thoughtfully, "vere he could haf gone. Gone avay to his rambles again—and you vould go, too—vat vill it all mean? Nobodys but Old Dan und meinself vill stick to it. Ah, no, Dennis, mein boy, ve could not work de pusiness mitout you, und I vill haf nodings to do mit puying."

And thus the negotiation failed.

"You vill stop here for de night," Jacob went on, "und ve vill haf a good time. De boys vill be in, und dey vill be wanting you to sing your songs."

O'Byrne stayed, and in jovial company forgot amidst the bacchanalian orgies of the night his previously-formed resolution to forego whisky-making and, perhaps, whisky-drinking also, and if the words of Old Dan uttered in his sleep crossed his mind in terrible suggestiveness, he did not allow them to dwell there.

"Drames," he said to himself, "nothin' but drames."

Dan, meanwhile, had cleaned the rifle carefully. He took it down again towards evening and handled it affectionately, and the intention crossed his mind of going on an expedition with it the same night now that O'Byrne was

absent. But the moon would rise about nine or ten o'clock, and his purpose would be best suited by darkness. He was not anxious for recognition when he went on the particular service upon which he had set his heart. Besides, he concluded that some delay might be judicious.

"It'll wait," he said. "It'll kape fresh and green. The devil a need there is for hurry, an' it's safer to wait. I'd better lie low for a bit, but I'll kape it in mind, devil a fear av that. It'll do in a twelvemonth for the matter av that for ayther av them. The night afore the weddin' wud suit fine for wan av them."

And he laughed as he hung up the rifle again, and went outside. One of the dogs was scratching a hole in the potato plot, and Dan, with an oath, flung a piece of wood savagely at him, which sent him off howling.

Dan, probably, sooner or later, would have carried to accomplishment the fell purpose which he had formed, had not an incident occurred that prevented him.

O'Byrne returned early on the following day, and as the wild cattle had been again heard in the vicinity, it was decided to go out in quest of them.

After an early dinner, armed with the rifles and accompanied by the dogs, they set out. Skirting the spurs of the mountain range in the direction from which the bellowing had been heard, they at length came upon fresh tracks. These they followed up till, on a small plateau well up on the range, they came upon the mob.

Cautiously, and keeping the cattle to windward, they crept nearer, the well-trained dogs following close at heel, for the hunters hoped to get near enough for a shot before the cattle became aware of their approach. Had the herd seen or scented them before a shot could be obtained, and broken and fled, then the dogs would have been sent in pursuit, and would probably have succeeded in bailing up and detaining some members of it; though, most likely,

only an old bull or two that, scouting danger, would have turned and shown fight. On this occasion, however, Old Dan was able to sight and bring down a fine heifer before the presence of the hunters was apprehended; and this put an end to the chase for the day.

After skinning and cutting up the beast, and reserving a sufficient burden of it for each to carry home, they hung the rest of the carcass to a tree, out of reach of any wild pigs that might be roaming the neighbourhood. They then started homewards, each with his load of meat, intending to return on the following day for a further portion. They proceeded down the same spur for some distance, following a cattle track through the dense bush; and it was O'Byrne's intention to still continue down the same spur to the lower ground, and then keep along the foot of the hills to the wharé by a route that he was familiar with. By crossing a deep gully or ravine on their left, they could have gained a spur on the opposite side which led more directly homewards, and might have shortened the actual distance to be travelled by a mile or more.

This route, however, was extremely rough and steep in its first part; but Old Dan seemed determined to take it.

"Bad luck to the fut I'm goin' roun' the night," he said; "wanst I'm on the other side, it'll be straight down on the wharé for me—an' a decent track, too."

"Faith, an' ye'd be savin' yersilf a rough tramp an' a steep climb if ye tuk my advice an' come with me," said Dennis—"an' be home ivery bit as soon."

"The devil a fear," replied Dan, who was in an obstinate mood. "Take yer own road for it, an' av I don't bate ye home by twinty minutes, I'll folly like a dog iver asther. It's the night'll be on ye afore ye're there. Ould man an' all that I am, it isn't a gully on the Range that'll frighten me to cross, an' hump a swag av mate into the bargain."

They parted, each taking his own way, the dogs following O'Byrne. He was able to keep on the cattle track for some considerable distance down the spur, and made good progress, though the load which he carried was much heavier than Dan's. He was anxious to reach the wharé first, but was by no means confident of doing so, for though Dan had a long and steep sideling to descend, and another yet steeper to climb on the opposite side, yet he knew that the old man was tough and wiry, and would put forth every effort to beat him.

But when he reached the wharé Old Dan was not there. O'Byrne boiled the billy and had his tea, and still Dan did not come. Night had now set in, and he began to fear that something might have happened to the old man. He could not have lost his way in the bush altogether, he thought; for after crossing the ravine the route could not well be mistaken; and even if he had wandered slightly from the true course, he still ought to have reached home before now.

At last O'Byrne set out to look for him, taking the direction in which he was most likely to meet him. He "cooed" now and then as he went, stopping to listen for a reply, but none was returned. When at length he gained the brow of the ravine, and was about to again "cooee," he was startled by a wild, despairing yell, more like the howl of some wild animal than the cry of a human being, that rose from the depth below him.

O'Byrne at once plunged downward through the thick and tangled bush, for he knew that he whom he sought was there in some dire strait. The descent appeared to him long and difficult, for the supplejacks caught and held him at times, or tripped him in his hurry. When he had nearly reached the bottom, the same yell was repeated, and was his guide as to the direction he should take; and as he proceeded still farther, he could hear low mutterings,

rising at times into what appeared to be fierce questionings and denunciations. Led by the sounds, he at length found Old Dan lying, ripped and drenched with blood on a small flat close by the stream that rattled over its stony bed in the bottom of the gully. He had evidently, in coming down the other side, stumbled into, or invaded suddenly in some way, the lair of a wild boar. The fierce brute must have at once charged him, throwing him down, and inflicting with his tusks as he passed a fearful wound in groin and side. It would seem, also, that as Dan attempted to gain his feet, the boar must have returned to a second charge; but this time, as the brute passed over him, inflicting another gash, Dan, who in the interval must have drawn his knife, had plunged it from beneath into the body of the animal, and, as it was afterwards proved, with fatal effect, for the carcass of the boar was subsequently found only a chain or two away from the spot. He was a huge beast with the scars of many a previous encounter thick upon him. O'Byrne remembered having put a bullet into him on a former occasion, and having had one of his dogs badly ripped by him.

The mosquitos, which were still troublesome in the bush, attracted now by the smell of blood, had collected in myriads about the helpless man, swarming upon his face and in his ears. Maddened by these, and weakened by his wounds and loss of blood, Old Dan was fast losing his senses. He, however, recognised O'Byrne's presence and voice.

"Is it you, Dinnis?" he said. "I'm done for now, Dinnis—the b—— boar has put the kybosh on me at last." And then he reverted with wandering mind and disconnected utterances to some of the scenes of his past life.

"Whisht, alannah, whisht," he muttered in soft tones; "it had to be done, an' what's the good av cryin'—let them that owned him 'keen' for him, bad luck to the

breed av thim." And then, breaking into louder speech, and making a vain effort to rise, he went on, "Are ye here agin, ye Scotch b——, standin' there wid yer Glengary cap, an' glarin' at me wid yer stupid eyes, like ye did the minit I knifed ye. The pratie-plot couldn't hould ye, couldn't it?—an' yit I rammed ye well in. Av I could raich ye, I'd knife ye agin," and he made another attempt to raise himself, but fell backward, uttering again, but more feebly, that wild yell of hate and despair which first attracted Dennis to the spot.

Recalled for a moment to a sense of his present position by the effort and by an exclamation of horror from O'Byrne, who crossed himself and began to repeat his prayers, Dan whispered, "Wanderin' in me mind, was I? Ye'll not be heedin' what I was sayin', Dinnis. Ye're me sister's son, Dinnis, an' it's no saycret to ye what I was sent out for—an' me mind is going back in spite av me to the ould places—an' the faces av the dead have looked at me. Whisht!" he went on, after a pause, "do ye hear the keenin' av the wimmin now—they're wakin' Darragh, the night afther he was shot. Och, a bloody vingeance there'll be for that same."

O'Byrne, sorely distressed and perplexed in mind, and horrified by what he had heard, was doubtful how to act. It was impossible for him, single handed, to carry Dan to the wharé; and, on the other hand, it seemed cruel to have to leave him in his present desperate plight in order to seek assistance which could not be obtained in less than an hour and a half or two hours, hurry as he might; and if other ears listened to Old Dan's awful ravings, what fateful consequences might ensue. To set out in search of help was after all the only course likely to be of service to the injured man. O'Byrne, therefore, first binding up and staunching, as best he could, the wounds which even he could see were most serious, if not indeed mortal, and

lighting a fire of damp wood near, so as to abate in some measure the onslaught of the mosquitos, and fastening up one of his dogs as some protection, hurried off. Denis was fleet of foot, but his progress through the bush was necessarily slow; and it was only after he reached the wharé, and gained the track leading to the township, that he was able to put on speed. It was some two miles down the track to the nearest habitation; and here he was fortunate in obtaining assistance to return with him, while a boy was sent off to Bloomsbury in quest of the doctor.

It was well that O'Byrne had tied up his dog where Dan lay, and had thrown a log on the fire he had made, else the returning party might have experienced great difficulty in finding the exact spot. The dismal howling of the dog, and, afterwards, a gleam of light from the fire guided them thither—but only to find the dead body of Old Dan. His face still wore the black look of hate that had become familiar to it.

They carried the body to the wharé on a roughly made stretcher, and in the morning it was conveyed to the Cosmopolitan, where an inquest was held.

O'Byrne never returned to the wharé or the section. He shunned the place as if it were plague-stricken. He left Bloomsbury the day after Old Dan's body was laid in clay, and went road-making farther up country.

Brasch gave out that he had bought the section, but some said that O'Byrne had made him a present of it. In any case, Brasch had it transferred to his name, and continued to keep up all payments on it.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WILMOT, quietly and with some degree of secrecy, continued his preparations for leaving the colony. He parted with most of his real property as speedily as he could without sacrificing any, and disposed of his shares in those concerns whose shares were marketable.

It was really to America that he intended to transfer himself and his ready cash; but he at length made it known that the time had arrived when he found it necessary to make a long projected visit to England, but intimated his intention of returning as soon as his affairs would allow him to do so, which he hoped would be in about five or six months.

The *Bloomsbury Guardian*, in making this announcement, also stated that it was the intention of the residents to entertain at a public banquet their distinguished fellow-colonist. "A gentleman," the paper went on to say, "who has been associated with the progress of the town and district in a most intimate and remarkable degree; who has ever taken a leading part—the initiative, indeed, very often—in everything that has been brought forward with a view to the prosperity and advancement of this rising settlement. Liberal-minded, a man of large views and wide experience, it has been, and still is, our hope that he will yet be prevailed upon to serve, in a more extended field and wider sphere, the district which already owes so much to his zeal and ability—that in his place in Parliament, in the council of the nation, he will yet watch over the interests of the Colony,

and of that important portion of it in which he has made his home. That this hope is shared in by the great majority of the electors of the Bloomsbury constituency will, we feel sure, be amply demonstrated at the coming general election, if Mr. Wilmot consents to be nominated for the seat ; for it is his intention to be again amongst us before that time arrives. The business concerns which have necessitated his departure from our midst for a brief season will allow of his return in sufficient time for his friends to place him in that position of honour which they are so anxious that he should fill. In the meantime, it is our duty and privilege to show the high regard in which we hold Mr. Wilmot by giving him a worthy send-off, and, in enthusiastic unison of assembled friends and admirers, wishing him a prosperous and pleasant journey and a speedy return. The banquet about to be given in his honour will, we are confident, bear ample testimony to the high estimation in which Mr. Wilmot is held by all classes of the community ; and the names of the gentlemen who have the affair in hand, published in another column, are a sufficient guarantee that everything will be done to make it worthy of the occasion."

Wilmot was highly pleased with the laudatory article in the *Guardian*, and secured half a dozen copies of the paper. The way, also, in which the proposal for the dinner in his honour was taken up flattered his vanity.

He was fond of display, of notoriety, and, whatever his escapades in the past may have been, was desirous now of standing well with his fellow-men—but in a conspicuous way ; of being pointed out and talked of as a man of weight and importance. One, therefore, willing and anxious to make himself prominent in all public matters, and who lost no opportunity of doing so; shrewd and clever in all matters of business, with plenty of bold determination when required, he was just the man to come to the front in a young community. His dearest ambition would have been grati-

fied could he have represented the Bloomsbury constituency in Parliament, where, he flattered himself, his voice would be heard to advantage on most questions of the day. He would at least have entered the doors of the Parliament buildings and walked its passages with as stately a step and a bearing as important as any of his fellow-members.

He was conscious of the democratic and semi-socialistic tendency of the time, and had adopted ultra-liberal views, posing as the champion of the working man and the struggling settler; and could speak in eloquent, though vague, terms of the progress of the age, the march of freedom, the awakening of the masses to their just rights and privileges, the advances made in the science of government, the duties of the State, and of much that yet remained to be accomplished. But he was insincere in most of this, and could, without outraging his principles, have equally well upheld the opinions of the other side in politics, and have denounced as rash and experimental, and dangerous to the welfare of the people, all such "advanced" legislation as he was now prepared to advocate. His politics, like those of many another man, were built on the basis of personal interest; and, as his desire to enter Parliament was great, he shaped that course which was most likely to lead him there. He was influenced in his choice also by the fact that the sitting member for the district belonged to the Conservative section—a well-meaning man, but easy-going, and content to leave things very much as he found them. In furtherance of his designs on the constituency, Wilmot's interest, therefore, lay in taking up a position amongst the forward advocates of progressive measures; but at the same time he was careful to assure all those of his acquaintance, who were naturally timid, or who were fearful of the indirect and ultimate effects of so-called liberal legislation, that there was nothing revolutionary about him, that a man with his stake in the

country was not going to support any measure likely to injuriously affect capital. "Oh no, sir!" he would say. "But capital must not be too selfish—it must bear its burden as well as labour. The settlement of this glorious country, sir, must not be retarded by a too-grasping exclusiveness, an over-greedy monopoly. The march of progress must be general and all-embracing. Legislation must assist the weak in the battle of life. The weight of the burden must be adjusted to the strength of the shoulders that have to bear it. The prosperity of all, not of the few only, must be our aim. The broad and eternal principles of justice must underlie all our enactments. The eye of hope must not be made dim in those who are down, the aspirations of those who wish to rise must be made easy of accomplishment."

And thus in general terms, and in language somewhat inflated, would he give expression to sentiments which no one was prepared to dispute. That he should be the successful candidate at the next election, if he stood for the constituency, he allowed himself to have little reason to doubt; and when in Wellington, during the early part of the previous session, had, indeed, from his place in the gallery, selected, after some deliberation, the seat in the Chamber which as a member he would try to secure. He felt keenly, therefore, the force of circumstances which rendered it expedient for him to leave the Colony, at a time when the wish of his heart had every prospect of soon being realised. But the presence of Elwood so near him was a bar to his security. He was afraid that sooner or later he would be recognised by him. It is true the old man rarely visited the township, and when he did Wilmot was careful to keep out of his way. If at first he had felt any compunctions of conscience at the bent form and prematurely aged countenance of his former partner, he had brushed these aside; and it was now with feelings akin to hate that he looked on the

man whom he had wronged, and who now, by the irony of fate, appeared as the unconscious instrument to thwart his schemes of ambition. When Elwood offered his place for sale—with the object, it was believed, of leaving the district and the Colony—Wilmot had felt a weight suddenly lifted off his mind, but the sudden withdrawal of the property from sale had annoyed and perplexed him. He had, indeed, sent a likely buyer or two out to look at the property, subsequent to its withdrawal.

"Not," as he said, "that it is placed in my hands for sale, and I will ask you not to mention my name in connection with your visit, but it was in the market some little time since, and if you can get it at anything like the price then asked, you will have dropped on a good thing. I know the district intimately, and Elwood's for its size is, without exception, the best property in it. Have a look at it. Tempt him with an offer. I have no interest in the sale of it, as I told you—not a penny of commission will come into my pocket; and, as I said, I don't want my name even mentioned in the transaction." The would-be buyer left, deeply impressed with the disinterestedness of at least one land agent. But nothing came of his visit. The owner did not intend at present to part with his farm.

Westall's disappearance was also a frequent source of uneasiness to the mind of Wilmot. Did the man actually crawl away and die in some secluded spot in the neighbouring bush, or had he succeeded in making good his escape and remaining in hiding somewhere, only to appear again at any time, doubly determined on making his disclosures? But more than four months had passed by since he was last seen, and Wilmot could hardly think that he would now reappear, since, if he were alive, he had kept quiet so long. Still, an uneasy feeling would lay hold on Wilmot at times. Some fancied resemblance to the man in the person of some one seen in the dis-

tance in the township, or of some wayfarer on a country road, would startle him into eager scrutiny. The thought that Westall might have died from the effects of the heavy blow he gave him with the loaded whip did not prey upon his mind so much as did the fear of his re-appearance in flesh and blood.

Could he have forgotten the man, Morton seemed bent on keeping him and the encounter of the night fresh in Wilmot's recollection. Morton somehow met Wilmot oftener lately than heretofore; and whereas formerly he would pass him by without recognition, or with only a nod, or would sit in the same room with him without entering into conversation, he now lost no opportunity of accosting him, and, especially if in the presence of others, would bring up Westall's name, and re-question him as to the particulars of the assault. Wilmot thought he saw a covert mock in the words and manner of Morton, and would wave the subject aside in his grand way and turn the conversation into other channels, only at some point, perhaps, to have it adroitly diverted back again. His resentment increased towards his tormentor, yet he kept it under, and did not care to openly break with him, for he began to fear Morton's biting tongue and keen, penetrating glance.

When Wilmot's intention to visit England was first made publicly known, Morton, who on the same evening returned from Wellington in company with a Mr. Brown, was profuse in his expressions of regret, when he met Wilmot in the commercial room of the Criterion, in company with a few others.

"This sudden determination to leave us," he said, "comes like a shock to all of us; and I can join with your many friends here in regretting the necessity for it. I am quite sincere in that," he added, as he thought he saw a smile of incredulity pass between Spalding and

Ponsonby; and then went on. "They tell me your absence will be only temporary, but I can hardly believe you have any serious intention of coming back to this out-of-the-way, scrag-end corner of the earth's surface. You are only sparing our feelings in letting us suppose so. You know we should be inconsolable if we thought we were about to lose you altogether. Ah, confess now that this humdrum existence here has lost its charms for you. What can New Zealand offer? Not even a seat in its paltry Legislature could tempt you to remain. A man of your abilities must have a wider field for the exercise of them than we can offer."

"My dear sir," Wilmot replied, "my ambition is quite satisfied to remain in this rising colony, to which I hope shortly to return."

"America, now!" Morton went on. "There's a country where a man like you can have scope—'ample verge and room enough'—to lay about him, and give full play to his talents; where a bold spirit may see dazzling heights of success his for the climbing; and if he finds the Ten Commandments too heavy to take along with him he can throw them aside without exciting much comment—not that you, Mr. Wilmot, would be likely to cast these aside there any more than here. Your sense of moral obligations might, of course, be a drag on you; but, for all that, I believe Fortune would wait on you there like a very bond-slave. And if shooting-irons are over-plentiful, and used rather freely in that country, we know that you wouldn't much mind that drawback. A man who has coped single-handed with armed highwaymen in New Zealand is not going to be afraid to look into the barrel of a revolver in any part of the world. It would be a great satisfaction to me," he added, "if that fellow who stuck you up, or who was one of those who did—Westall you think his name is—could be brought up before you left."

Wilnot hardly knew how to take Morton's remarks. He suspected there was derision behind them, but in the words themselves there was nothing to take exception to, and he replied in his grandiose way:

"I have no great desire to see the fellow brought to justice. He has had his punishment. America," he went on, "is, as you say, a country offering a vast field for enterprise. Colossal fortunes are built up there every day—but at what a cost, at what a fearful cost! The impoverishment, the degradation of the many too often follows, or is concurrent with the aggrandisement of the few. No, sir, better a competency in a land like this, where the disparities of social existence are not so glaringly apparent, than the wealth of a Vanderbilt, bought so dear."

Morton smiled, and said, "I see you have too soft a heart for the making of a millionaire—too tender a conscience to allow you to trample on broken hearts. The wail of the vanquished would be too much for you; the bitter cry of the hungry, whose bread had been taken away; the curses of the criminal, who had been goaded into crime, could never be directed against you. Your heart would bleed to see even the guilty suffer, let alone the innocent. What a man, to be sure! What a loss we are sustaining if you don't come back! I will begin to think better of humankind after this. They say, Virtue is its own reward; but surely Fate, or Providence, or whatever it is that is supposed to regulate our affairs here, will not suffer you to go unrequited. By the way," he continued, "let me introduce my friend, Mr. Brown, to you. Mr. Brown is a bit of a globe-trotter—has been round it once or twice, and just mixes enough business with his pleasures to give travel a zest; and, now I think of it, he may be a fellow-passenger of yours home—eh, Brown? I know you have made up your mind to be off back again shortly."

Mr. Brown assented, saying that he did not purpose making a long stay in the Southern Hemisphere on this trip,

as his presence was expected shortly on the other side of the globe. He said this with just the least twinkle of merriment in his eye. A well-built, muscular man he was, of middle age, with a pleasant, easy manner; but shrewd wariness, coupled with strong courage, could be read in his face.

"If you are fortunate in being fellow-passengers," Morton went on, "I venture to predict that you will get on capitally together—become inseparable companions, in fact. I am much mistaken if you are not just cut out for each other."

Wilmot replied that it would give him great pleasure to have Mr. Brown's society on the voyage, but that really he had not yet quite decided on what route he would take—probably by way of Australia, as he should like to take a run through it again, see an old friend or two, and attend to some little matters of business.

"Ah," said Morton, "you should arrange to voyage together. But you are sure to meet again. This earth is shrinking in size every day; and you can't depend on keeping clear of anyone on it for long—even if you want to."

Wilmot glanced inquiringly at the speaker for a moment, but made no reply; and then, saying something about an appointment he had, left the room.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ASHWIN had lately not seen as much of his neighbours, the Elwoods, as formerly. His visits during the past month or two had been few. Knowing that his presence caused some embarrassment to Miss Elwood—from which feeling, indeed, he himself was not wholly free—he had only called on her father when some matter of business made a call necessary. But on these few occasions he saw little of the desire of his heart, and had hardly an opportunity, had he wished for such, of broaching the subject ever present in his thoughts. He had given a kind of promise, also, to abstain from pressing his suit until some change took place in the conditions under which they were mutually placed, if that time should ever arrive; and for the present, therefore, he was constrained to love on, yet breathe no word of love. But love held strong possession of him, and he felt it very hard to keep silence when he found himself alone with the object of it. Once, indeed, the desire overpowered his resolve. He had overtaken Miss Elwood and her brother as they were riding back from Bloomsbury. Her father had now provided her with a suitable hack, light in the rein, easy and free in its paces: and she rode it with grace and firm confidence. Ted, on this occasion, was riding Bob, the unwilling. They had had a smart canter just before Frank overtook them, and the exhilaration of the ride had heightened the bloom on her cheeks and the lustre of her eyes; and her lover thought he had never seen her look more beautiful; and when Ted dropped behind and dismounted, in order to cut a supplejack out of the bush (for

the rod he had been using on Bob was worn to a stump), Ashwin felt that the love within him must overleap restraint, and gain expression.

“Since that night of the fire, Miss Elwood,” he said, in a low voice, “I have not spoken to you of what is ever nearest my heart, but, oh! do not judge from this that my love is less strong than it was then. It is stronger, more unchangeably fixed than ever. I know I should not now say so. I know you have forbidden me to speak of it. Forgive me if this once I have been impelled to declare again that not in life, in death itself, can I ever cease to love you, and you alone. Oh, dearest one! it is hard to live like this. Bid me hope—give me some faint gleam of hope!”

Miss Elwood was moved by his renewed fervent avowal, but, as Frank saw with some satisfaction, not able to show displeasure at it.

“It is not wise, Mr. Ashwin,” she said; “it is indeed wrong of you to again allude to this painful subject. Believing you to be sincere in—in what you say, it would be cruel in me to hold out any definite hopes, which might be at any moment shattered irreparably. You know why I say this—I have tried to make my determination clear. The cloud of shame and disgrace that rests on my father’s name must first be lifted, before I can lend a willing ear to word of love or proposal of marriage from you—from anyone. If that barrier should ever be removed—I am wrong, perhaps, in saying that lately some faint expectations have been entertained that it may be—I feel I have even now said too much—it may be impossible to bring forward full proof of innocence—the law is hard and unfeeling, and will not readily make amends. The world, too, is prone to believe the worst; and, even though innocence were made clear, it would deem some stain still clung around a name once branded as a felon’s.”

“But surely,” replied Ashwin, “you would not attach

any weight to the world's opinion in that case—you would not allow it to influence you?"

"I do not say that I would," she answered.

Ashwin felt as if he could curse the world and all its jaundiced views of things.

"You know how I feel in this regard," he said. "I should think myself a thousand times more fortunate in winning you as you are, with this stain on your father's name—even though it were deserved—than in gaining the highest height of what the world calls honour. Come to my heart, and we will defy the world. We will not let a thought of its frowns or sneers disturb the sweet current of our life. Give me at least," he added, for he saw and knew that no other answer would be given to his plea save that which he had already received, "give me at least the right to aid you—to assist in clearing your father's reputation, and I will devote my life to the task. In such a cause, for such a reward, I feel as if I could leap on the back of impossibility, and break down all obstacles."

And in the exultation which the thought gave rise to, and in impatience of restraint, Ashwin unconsciously applied the spurs with unwonted pressure to his horse's sides. This the spirited animal resented by suddenly bounding forward in a way that might have unseated some riders, but his master pulled him up before he had gone many strides, and soothed and patted him into comparative quietness again, as he rejoined his fair companion.

Miss Ashwin could not help smiling at this evidence of love's impetuosity; but when Frank reined up again beside her, she replied, with some sadness in her voice:

"It cannot be, Mr. Ashwin; indeed, it cannot be. The task is in other hands, and, after all, it may only end in disappointment. For your own sake, Mr. Ashwin, I could not give you the right you plead for."

Her brother now came up on Bob, who, under the influence

of the fresh supplejack, was putting forth unusual speed, and their colloquy was ended.

If Ashwin saw but little of his neighbours, he began to notice that Morton was a not infrequent visitor at the Elwood's. This he deemed the more remarkable, knowing as he did how unsociable, as a rule, that gentleman was, and especially how great was the dislike to the society of womankind, which he made no secret of entertaining. Yet now Ashwin had seen him more than once walking in the garden with the old man and his daughter—even seated with the latter alone on the verandah on one occasion, and he had also heard, incidentally, of their having been seen riding from the township together.

This discovery, in the present state of his feelings, gave him anything but pleasure. Was another about to succeed where he had failed? Were the scruples which he had failed to overcome about to be laid aside at the solicitation of another? His trust in the truth and honesty of the girl he loved was doubtless great—implicit, he would have said, had he been questioned—yet doubt at times, with grinning visage, would force itself upon him, and hold up an impudent finger, and mock him for his faith. To be sure, Morton was a much older man than he, and, Ashwin flattered himself, not so good-looking, nor in manner and disposition so likely to find favour in the eyes of a young girl. But then, on the other hand, who can account for the predilections of a woman, and Miss Elwood was not an ordinary girl. She might be governed by influences and considerations which would exercise little weight with other girls of her age, and Morton, cynical and caustic though he was, might make an impression on her heart, where a younger, handsomer, and more happily constituted lover might not succeed in doing so.

And then he would recall the sweet witchery of her presence, dwell on each incident of their short intimacy, her self-devotion on the night of his accident, and the ray of hope which he thought was vouchsafed to him then and also

since. No ; he would never allow himself to believe her capable of lightly giving encouragement to the hopes of another while denying it to his own. He would not harbour a thought distrustful of her. And yet, what right had he to claim any exclusive monopoly of this girl, who had known him for only so short a time? When she should feel free to listen to words of love and proffer of marriage, what right had he to expect that he alone should be privileged to utter them, or, indeed, that another's might not be more pleasing to her ear, and find acceptance?

Now, while he felt that he could not, and would not, blame Miss Elwood for giving countenance to this newly found interest in her, which Morton seemed lately to evince, he, however, began to look with a less friendly eye on that gentleman. Why the deuce couldn't he stay at home, and bark and bite at mankind in general and womankind in particular? After all, these woman-haters could not be depended on, and were generally led captive at last.

In any case, this new departure on Morton's part was not to be commended at all ; and Ashwin, in his meetings with him, began to show his disapproval of it. It was now with a curt "Good morning" or "Good afternoon" that he returned the greetings of the other. Formerly, when they met, he was glad to stop and have a chat, if Morton seemed in the humour for conversation, which, it must be said, was pretty often the case when Ashwin was concerned, for he evidently liked the young man, and unbent and unbosomed himself in his society in kindly fashion other than was his wont. He now noticed the changed demeanour of Ashwin, and was not long in fathoming the cause of it.

"Ashwin is jealous of me," he said, and he laughed in his bitter way. "He thinks I am trying to lay siege to Miss Elwood's heart, and to cut him out in that quarter. It is too ridiculous. Shall I let the young fool continue for a while to think so? Ah, no!" he went on, "there is enough

misery in the world without me trying to increase it. The sum of it is too great already, and this young fellow will eat his heart away with foolish imaginings if I don't undeceive him. Jealous of me!—ha, ha, ha!"

Accordingly, the next time he saw Ashwin passing he called out and stopped him.

"Come in, Ashwin," he said; "come in. I have something to say to you. I haven't seen much of you of late. Come in."

Ashwin pleaded that he had business in Bloomsbury, and that he was rather pushed for time.

"Oh, nonsense, man!" replied the other; "there is nothing so pressing as all that. I want to have a talk with you on a matter of importance. Tie up your horse a moment and come in. You can make up for lost time on the road. Time will run to seed when we are under the sod; there'll be time enough and to spare then." And then, as Ashwin dismounted and tied up his horse, Morton repeated to himself, with feeling, the well-known lines—

"Even such is Time who takes on trust
Our youth, our joys, our all we have,
And pays us but with age and dust;
Who in the dark and silent grave,
When we have wandered all our ways,
Shuts up the story of our days."

"Well, perhaps there isn't much to mourn over in all that," he continued, as they walked towards the cottage. "To shut the Book of Life ought to give as much satisfaction as turning over the weary pages. To die, and have done with it, should be no great affliction to anyone. But, Ashwin," he went on, "I don't expect you to take this view of things. I am but a withered plant, and shouldn't mind being plucked up by the roots; but love and beauty and bright days lie ahead of you, my boy, or I'm mistaken. Disenchantment may come

to you as to others, but when it comes is time enough to draw a long face."

"Disenchantment," Ashwin replied, somewhat gloomily, "or disappointment at least, has come already. I am afraid you are mistaken or over-sanguine in allotting a more than ordinary share of human happiness to me. The prospect at present hardly warrants me in expecting such."

"Ah, look here, Ashwin," Morton replied, "I know your secret trouble. Forgive me for speaking of it. You are in love; and I won't blame you, or try to reason you out of it—that I know would be a piece of unavailing folly. Besides, I believe the girl you love to be one of the best and truest of women. You know I have not a high opinion of the sex generally, but there are exceptions among them I will admit—few and far between, perhaps. If I had won the heart of such a girl as Miss Elwood ten or a dozen years ago—ah, well!—I might have read life in a different light. But that is past. I never, perhaps, was quite the man to make conquest of a woman's love, or retain it, and I am resolved never again to make the attempt. Love is blind, they say, and I believe it. The wisest, shrewdest man is but a simpleton when his affections are involved. The proof of love's blindness has been brought home to me. To love, and to believe you are beloved in return is a man's great happiness; but to take the loved one to your bosom, and awake to your blindness when writhing under the mortal hurt which the viper you have cherished there has given you, is experience enough for a lifetime. But never mind!—one man's experience is not another's; neither will another profit by it. You love where a true man's love may meet the reward it deserves. And if you have not won Miss Elwood's heart, I am sure that no one else has. But she will be no man's wife, nor listen to a word of love from anyone, so long as the black shadow of her father's past is over them all. She is over sensitive in this, I suppose. You and I, I know, would think none the less

highly of her if her father were the guilty man he is supposed to be. "By heavens!" he exclaimed, "if only honest men's daughters were to get married, the world would be overrun with old maids. Bridal blushes would be rare, at any rate. But," he continued, "the old man's name will be cleared yet, I venture to predict, and before long, perhaps. When that time comes make your wooing, and prosper in it. Till then, keep silence, or let your looks speak only: for you must not absent yourself, as you have done lately, from her society and her father's. The old man misses you. Keep a brave heart, Ashwin. Don't lose hope, and, above all things, don't be jealous of any one, especially of me, ha, ha, ha! That would be too ridiculous."

Ashwin at first hardly knew how to take the outspoken words of the other, and was inclined to resent them; but when Morton had finished speaking, and Frank looked into the face of his counsellor, and saw kindly feeling made manifest there, where cynicism too often held possession, touched, too, by the speaker's words of bitter import, evoked by some memories of the past, he held out his hand, and said:

"I believe you to be a true friend, Morton; and I thank you for the kindly interest you have taken in what so deeply concerns me. I thank you for your counsel, and especially for the glimpse of hope you have given me. You are right. I love Miss Elwood, and have loved her almost from the first moment I saw her. You are right, also, in that which stands in the way of the furtherance of my suit, however you may have arrived at the knowledge. I have, of course, no assurance that I should be the fortunate man to win her for my wife, even though her father's innocence were made clear; but until this can be done, I know that I am shut out from all hope."

"Never mind," Morton replied, "there is hope for you yet, and for all of them, or I'm mistaken. The wrong shall be right; and if in righting it we can strip the sham respecta-

bility off Imposture's well-brushed back, so much the better. But breathe not a word of this. "If the world," he went on, bitterly—"if the world could only be cleared of shams, it might be worth living in. Sham respectability, sham honesty, sham honour, sham righteousness, sham benevolence, sham piety, sham affection, sham love, sham virtue, sham worth—black night and the pit of destruction receive all shams! But sit down, Ashwin, here on the verandah, and stay a while. I have spoken to you more freely than I am in the habit of doing. Sit down with me, after this talk, and smoke your pipe, or at least sit down with me while I smoke mine, for I know you don't often indulge in the soothing weed. There is comfort in it, though.

'Think, and smoke tobacco ;
And if your mistress proves unkind,
In faithful pipe your solace find—
Think, and smoke tobacco.'

Think, and smoke tobacco ;
And when the pipe gets foul within,
Think of the soul defiled with sin—
Think, and smoke tobacco.'"

But Ashwin said he really must be off, and took his leave; and he was soon cantering at a fast pace along the road to Bloomsbury, with a lighter heart than when he left home.

CHAPTER XXXVII

IT was the evening of the farewell banquet to be given in honour of Mr. Wilmot. Preparations had been going on all day at the Criterion; but in a quiet, methodical way, for there was never any fuss or fluster at Powlet's. The genial Bob appeared, if possible, more beamingly satisfied with himself and all about him than before. The look of pride with which he regarded his wife, as she went about her duties, was perhaps more intensified than usual, and seemed to say: "You can't take her amiss. The clockwork's set agoin'—every wheel and bearing's oiled, and working true. There'll be no hitch here. The bell will ring to the minute, and everything 'll be served up just as it ought to be. There's never any flurry or commotion where *she's* in charge—you can bet a pound on that, and win it. If the Governor was to order dinner here for the House of Representatives, and the Legislative Council to boot, with most of the civil servants thrown in, they wouldn't find much to grumble at when they sat down, if they'd give her twenty-four hours' notice they were coming—that is, as far as a country hotel could do it, and I believe we could stand a bit of a strain in this house as well as most."

A little later in the evening, however, Powlet did show some signs of surprise and agitation. It was when Morton called him aside into a private room, and held him in earnest speech for some minutes. Bob's share in the conversation consisted at first only in excited ejaculations as he

wiped his face with his large silk pocket-handkerchief. "God bless my soul and body!"—"Who ever heard the like?"—"I couldn't have believed it!"—"Going to arrest him!" And when Morton had finished, he exclaimed, "Whatever will the missus say to this, that's what I want to know? The dinner coming off, too, in an hour's time or less—that's if it's coming off at all now. She won't like it, I can tell you, sir! Things oughtn't to have gone so far as they have."

"Well," said Morton, "perhaps not; but we couldn't well help it. I shouldn't say anything to Mrs. Powlet about it to-night. Let things take their course for this night. We don't intend doing anything in the matter till the morning. I haven't much faith in a woman's discretion, as you may know; and though your wife is one above the common, I think she had better be left in ignorance of what is going on till the morning, or till all is quiet for the night."

"Discretion be blowed!" said Bob, warmly, though somewhat mollified by Morton's exception of Mrs. Powlet from the general run of women: "you haven't had to do with the right sort of women, sir, or you wouldn't run them down as you do. You haven't had to do with the right sort. That has been your misfortune, sir. Talk about discretion—I'll back my wife to do the right thing in the right way, and at the right time, and see it done better than any man among us, that I will. This house," he went on—"This house is run on strict partnership lines, and everything's fair and square and above board between the partners. They are both working partners in this concern, and one has got no secrets from the other. It wouldn't do. And if I keep this business you tell me about from my missus, why, there'll be—there'll be a coolness between the partners, that's what there'll be—a coolness between the partners. We should have known of this business before."

"I'll admit," answered Morton, "that it would have been better if you could have been made acquainted with it

sooner. But, you see, this man has only arrived, and we could not proceed in the matter till he came. Brown has been here for some days, it is true; but it was necessary for our purpose to wait for the other, and he only comes here to-night. He was seized with a bad attack of influenza, or something of the kind, the very day he landed in Wellington, and was only able to get about again yesterday. You will see that matters must take their course now. Our business can be settled quietly in the morning, but this dinner or banquet must proceed—your wife would agree with us in that. The company are arriving even now to do honour to the guest of the occasion, who, no doubt, has got his speech ready: as have the others who are to speak. Corcoran, of the *Guardian*, is, I hear, to propose the toast of the evening, and, I expect, has his speech in type already; and Ponsonby gives the health of the ladies. They must go through with it, of course; and Mrs. Powlet would be the last to have it otherwise. She wouldn't like to see a good dinner spoiled—you may be sure of that."

"I'm not sayin' that she would," said Powlet, thoughtfully. "There's no mistake about it, she wouldn't like to see that—that would touch her on a tender part—everything ready to be dished up, and no dinner after all. No, it wouldn't suit her at all. But she'll think she should have been consulted over this business—a d——d bad business it is—one partner ought to consult the other, you know. That's where the trouble comes in. There'll be a coolness between the partners, if we don't look out."

"You will consult with your wife, of course," replied Morton. "Tell her everything to-night, but wait till this dinner is over. The man I spoke of will be here by and by, and I have engaged a bed for him for to-night, as well as one for myself. Brown, I believe, has the room next Wilmot's—that's as it should be. We shall want a private room in the morning for our interview. The large sitting-room upstairs

will be best, for the old man and his daughter will be here also."

Bob felt much inclined to take his wife into his confidence there and then, but he saw little opportunity of doing so, as the hour appointed for the banquet had almost arrived, the people were assembling, and his presence was much in request just then, while Mrs. Powlet was giving a final round of inspection in dining-room and kitchen.

As Morton was passing out he was accosted by one or two of those who had already arrived.

"You are not leaving us, Mr. Morton," Corcoran said, stopping him. "It isn't often you join us in any function of this kind, I know; but on an occasion like the present, when we are meeting together in a friendly way to entertain at parting one whom we all respect and honour, and to bid him Godspeed on his journey, I did hope to see you amongst us."

"I should only damp your enthusiasm," Morton replied, with a laugh. "I shouldn't be able to enter into your 'Three times three,' and 'For he's a jolly good fellow' with sufficient spirit. But," he continued, in a more serious vein, "what's the use of bidding Godspeed when the devil is likely to be coachman? Look round and find an honest man, one whose honour is unsmirched, whose lips have never learnt to lie—never faltered from the truth, who would preserve his integrity if he had to die in a ditch for it, and well dinner him as a rarity."

"He's not altogether *compos mentis*," Corcoran remarked as Morton went out. "He has got some queer ideas of his own, and isn't always quite responsible for what he says, I fancy."

When Morton returned nearly an hour later, accompanied by a man muffled up in an overcoat, who at once passed upstairs, the banquet was in full swing. The toast of the evening had not yet been given, but Mr. Corcoran was just rising amidst applause to propose it. He was quite at home

on his legs as an after-dinner speaker, but began, as is customary, by a few words of self-disparagement.

“Gentlemen—Mr. Chairman and gentlemen,” he said, “the task which has been allotted to me to-night is one which I enter upon with diffidence, with extreme diffidence—not because my heart is not in it, gentlemen—not because I am not conscious of the honour conferred on me by being asked to undertake it—ah, no, but because I feel that I am not competent to do full justice to it, that my treatment of it must fall short, lamentably short, of what the occasion deserves. It is a task that should have been placed in abler hands than mine. (Cries of dissent.) Gentlemen,” he went on, “fellow settlers of this magnificent district, fellow citizens of this important centre, we have met here to-night—to-night, gentlemen—men from every corner of this settlement and from beyond it—strangers from a distance joining with us here—men of every shade of political opinion have met here to-night—for what purpose? (applause)—for what purpose? The purpose must be an extraordinary one, indeed, which has brought so many together here to-night, away from their homes, away from the bosom of their families. And, gentlemen, it is an extraordinary one. It is to do honour to one who—who is about to leave us for a time, but whose name must ever be a household word with the people of Bloomsbury, associated as it is in so many ways with the progress, with the prosperity, with the welfare of this rising commercial centre, of this large and growing district.”

The speaker then went on to particularise in detail the many benefits which the township and district owed to their distinguished guest. The services which he had rendered it as a member of the local governing body, the zeal he had ever displayed, his liberality and self-denial in all matters affecting the good of the community, were referred to in flattering terms. A hint was given of the wider field of usefulness in which they were anxious to place him on his return amongst

them, of the more exalted position which they were prepared to offer him.

“For,” said he, “it will give unqualified satisfaction, unmixed, unalloyed pleasure to all who are assembled in this room to-night, and to many who have not been privileged to join us here, to know that the absence of our distinguished fellow-colonist will not be a prolonged one—that in a few months he will be with us again. A report—I might call it a slanderous report—has gained currency during the last day or two that it is not our friend’s intention to return; but to this, gentlemen, I am authorised to give a most emphatic contradiction (Cheers.) A short, but well-earned holiday, a brief revisiting of the land of his birth, of the scenes of his youth, and a renewal of old friendships, is all that Mr. Wilmot contemplates. Did I say all, gentlemen?” Corcoran went on, in a lighter vein, with a twinkle in his eye. “Well, perhaps not all. He may have another object in view. I have said, I think, that the name of Wilmot will remain a household word amongst us. It must still be cherished and kept in memory by the people of this community. But, gentlemen, we are not without hope that it may yet be perpetuated in another and a pleasing way. It would not surprise me, gentlemen, and I am sure it would give infinite pleasure to all of us, if our honoured and esteemed friend here, when he returns again amongst us, should come not alone—not alone, gentlemen (great applause)—not alone, but bringing with him ‘One fair spirit for his minister’: a partner of his home and heart, one to share his joys, his wealth, and the high social position which he is so well qualified to fill; and one, gentlemen, who would—a—help him to perpetuate his name in a—in a tenderer and more worthy fashion than we, with all our regard and affection for him, could—could ever hope to do. Should he so return—I think I can speak for you, gentlemen—his welcome will be a warm one, a hearty one, a welcome worthy of the occasion. (Cheers.) We have met to-night, gentlemen, to do honour

to our departing fellow-citizen, to wish him Godspeed on his journey, but our feelings of pleasure at so meeting him are tinged with some regret at the prospect of losing his presence from amongst us even for a brief season ; but when he returns, gentlemen (applause), accompanied as we hope he will be accompanied (great cheering), then, gentlemen, without a cloud to dim the—the horizon of our joy, we will assemble again to give him—them, I should say—a fit greeting, an enthusiastic welcome.” (Prolonged cheers.)

With a few more words, with a glowing tribute to the worth of the citizen, to the character of the man, Mr. Corcoran called on the company to drink to the health, pleasant journey, and speedy return of one whom they were proud to honour.

The toast was drunk with enthusiasm and with musical honours.

The distinguished guest sat through it all, with a face in which it was in vain to attempt to hide the satisfaction felt, for his soul was enamoured of this sort of thing.

The applause was subsiding, and Wilmot was waiting to make a decorous pause before responding, when one of the waiters (paid by Morton for the service with half a crown) handed him a letter. Wilmot opened it hastily, and read :

“Meet me in Number One Sitting-room, upstairs, to-morrow morning, at 10 o’clock.

“WM. WESTALL.”

In spite of his utmost effort to show unconcern, his face fell for a moment ; but he speedily regained control of his features, and, rising with becoming gravity, entered on his reply. It was noticed, however, that there was at first a hesitancy, a want of fluency, in his words unusual with him. He spoke of his feelings being overpowered by the presence of so many of his friends met together there in his honour, by the eulogistic terms in which his health had been proposed,

and the warmly appreciative manner in which the toast had been received—and his audience believed him. But, as he proceeded, his composure in great measure returned and his speech flowed with greater freedom; though it was afterwards remarked that his reply hardly came up to expectations, wanting somewhat, as it appeared, in that buoyant self-confidence with which Mr. Wilmot spoke in public, and in that ornate grandiloquent style in which his utterances were generally couched on such occasions, and not wholly free from a touch of sadness.

He spoke feelingly of his departure, and referred to his return as an event greatly desired indeed by him, and looked forward to with hope, but still uncertain. “Uncertainty,” he went on, “is written across all our resolves, all our purposes, in this mundane sphere. We may think that we have mapped out our future, and have picked out and hedged about our way through life; but a day, an hour, comes, and the prospect is obscured or blotted out, the landmarks we had set up to guide us are swept away, the scene is changed, and our steps are led into paths—rough and steep, perhaps—other than those which we had sketched out for our feet to follow. The tongue of calumny, even, may take the place of the voice of praise, and the scornful laugh be heard instead of the words of approbation.”

He then went on in more cheerful tone to speak of the happy and profitable years which he had spent amongst them: he eulogised the high character of the people among whom his lot had been cast, and dwelt upon the marvellous resources of the district and on the great future that lay before it, and proceeded to undervalue the services he had rendered to it and the share he had taken in furthering its progress. He, laughingly, disclaimed all intention of fulfilling the expectation of Mr. Corcoran, by bringing back a partner of his joys and sorrows. “I am getting too old,” he said, “to think of now entering the married state. (Cries of ‘No, no.’) But,

gentlemen, if I were younger, and desirous of taking a wife to share, to adorn my home, I need not, gentlemen, go outside of New Zealand—I need not go outside of this district—to look for one. Among the fair daughters of this fair land a prince might easily find a fit mate. Why, then, should one of its humblest citizens go elsewhere to seek one? No, gentlemen, my ambition would be satisfied to remain amongst you, to continue to make my home in your midst; but duty, gentlemen, duty calls me away from you for a short time—for a short time only, I hope; and in breaking, if only temporarily, the ties which have bound us together, in severing the connection which it has been my great good fortune to form with you in this place, I can assure you, gentlemen, that no words of mine can adequately convey to you the feelings which at this moment hold possession of my heart."

With a few final words, in which he expressed his grateful sense of the high honour which they had conferred on him by entertaining him there as their guest that evening, and with reiterated thanks for their kindly good wishes on his behalf, he sat down amid prolonged applause.

One or two of the most impressionable of the company were somewhat touched by the words of Wilmot, uttered, as they were, with an appearance of deep feeling; and good Mrs. Powlet and one of the girls, who were standing near the doorway, were seen to wipe their eyes, while Bob Powlet, who had also been listening, turned away with a puzzled look of concern on his face, and muttered audibly, "Well, I'll be blowed!"

Other toasts followed, interspersed with songs by members of the company. Ponsonby found a congenial subject in proposing "The Ladies." He admitted his own susceptibility to be wounded by the boy-god. He paid a high tribute to the beauty and many excellencies of the ladies of Bloomsbury, and thought their guest of the evening must be deemed to be impervious to female charms, else he must have suc-

cumbed ere now—if, indeed, it was not dislike to matrimonial shackles, rather than indifference to the tender influence of the sex, that caused him to shun wedlock. “And, egad, gentlemen, I venture to predict that he will fall a victim yet,” Ponsonby said, “but the avenger of her sex will be a widow.”

“The Press” was proposed, and duly honoured. The high moral tone and intellectual ability displayed by the Press of New Zealand in general, and by the *Bloomsbury Guardian* in particular, were alluded to in warm terms of praise.

The toast of “The Host and Hostess” was not forgotten, and was replied to by Bob Powlet in a short and characteristic speech, in which he did not fail to do justice to the merits of his wife.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IT was late when the party broke up, and later still when Wilmot retired to his room and to undisturbed communion with his own thoughts.

“Westall,” he mused, as he sat on the edge of his bed, “has turned up again, then, d——n him! and is bent on disclosure and revenge. Could money buy him even yet? I am afraid not. Naturally weak and easily led, yet, when we last met, he seemed bent on vindicating the character of the old man, and he isn’t likely to have altered his mind in the meantime—doubly determined he doubtless is now, and with no wish to screen me. He has now a grievance of his own to avenge, though money might make amends for this—it has salved many a sore head. But with whom has the fellow consorted since his disappearance? How many has he taken into his confidence? He may even have set the law in motion; but this is hardly likely, else he would not seek for the interview in the morning. His coming here openly and appointing a meeting in this house shows that he comes prepared, and that he has probably somebody at his back—Hartland, I expect, or Elwood as he is called here. This would account for the farm having been withdrawn from sale, and yet it was not placed in the market for a fortnight after Westall had disappeared. If the fellow had not turned up for another few days, I should have been away from here and have eluded him. Why should I not give him the slip even now?”

Wilmot's horse, not yet disposed of, was in a paddock near, and he knew where to lay his hand on his saddle and bridle. He could ride off that very night, he thought, leaving a note for Powlet making some excuse for hurriedly visiting one of the distant townships, but in reality proceed to Wellington, or, better still, one of the northern ports, and leave New Zealand before his absence had given rise to suspicion, or at least before steps could be taken to detain him. No credence would be given to Westall's unsupported testimony with regard to the assault—in fact, the fellow, if he laid an information against Wilmot, would be taken into custody himself on the charge of attempted highway robbery, for which he was still wanted; while Wilmot knew that, with respect to the more serious disclosures threatened touching the misdeeds of his former life, the machinery of the law would be slow to set in motion after the long lapse of time. He had good hopes, therefore, that if he got a day or two's start from Bloomsbury he would be able to get clear away without molestation. He could mention in his note to Powlet that his stay would probably be prolonged for a few days in one or other of the townships to which he would make the pretence of going. He had arranged his monetary affairs so as to enable him to make a hasty departure from the Colony, if he found it necessary to do so.

The other course open to him, and it was one that was more congenial to his temperament, was to stay, meet Westall and defy him, hand him over to the police on the former charge, and let him see whose was the strongest mind and the readiest of resource.

The thought, however, of having to face his old partner, who would now, no doubt, come forward, was a great deterrent. He shrank from meeting again the man who had undergone the penalty that should have been his to suffer, the man whose life had been so cruelly blighted. Wilmot felt that if he were forced to meet Elwood now, his only

safe course, under the present circumstances, would be to disclaim all previous acquaintance with him or with Westall in years gone by in England, and with a bold front and high hand turn the tables on the latter, and have him arrested and thrown into prison. He himself could then find time and opportunity for leaving the colony. But he was doubtful if he should altogether succeed in this course, and was averse to encountering Elwood, and having to brazen the lie out in his presence. He was ignorant, also, as to what steps Westall might have already taken, and what evidence he might be prepared to bring forward. Wilmot therefore decided to leave Bloomsbury at once—that night. He thought he possessed skill and cleverness enough to hide his tracks for a few days, and mystify anyone who might be making enquiries after him. In the note which he proceeded to write, he told Powlet of his intention to leave at daylight, so as to get well on his journey before the heat of the day, and dropped a hint that business might lead to deviation from the direct route and detention on the way, but that he hoped to return at the latest on the afternoon of the second day. He had not undressed ; and, having written the note, and put a few things into a valise, he cautiously opened the door of his room, and crept out. The house was in quietness. He was just stooping down, valise in hand, to pick up his boots, which he had left outside, when the door of the adjoining room opened softly, and Mr. Brown, who occupied it, stepped out, also ready dressed, candle in hand.

Wilmot drew back, and again closed the door of his room.

“D——n the fellow !” he thought. “What is he poking about for at this time of night, when he ought to be asleep in bed. I didn’t want Powlet and the rest of them to know that I went away in the middle of the night—it looks too suspicious—but to think that I left at daylight, just before the house began to stir. And now this d——d fellow must catch me on

the move, with the valise under my arm. Well, perhaps it's for the best. This sneaking away was never much to my taste. A bold course is more to my liking, and will be the best to follow. I'll stay and face the music, and if Mr. Westall doesn't dance to my playing before the day is out, I'll deserve to break stones for a living. My resources are not exhausted yet. A bold front and a cool head have brought me out of worse scrapes than this. This Brown, now I think of it, has been paying me a good deal of attention since he came here. He has made himself very friendly ; seems fond of my society ; appeals to me for information on every subject ; plays a good game of cards ; takes his glass in moderation, and makes himself agreeable ; was at the dinner, too, and seemed to enjoy himself ; and now he pokes his nose out of his door in the middle of the night as soon as I open mine. Bah ! there's nothing in it. Poor old Hartland ! I had rather not face you. If the Bristol business is to be revived after all these years, I may find it hard to shake myself clear of it. To be dragged back to answer for it would be a bitter pill now. The thrall, the narrow bounds, the long years of slavery. Ugh ! it were better to take the readier way of release, play the last stake, and cry quits. Hard work, rough fare, and a fettered foot wouldn't agree with me. The game has got to be played out now, but I'll keep the 'joker' up my sleeve. We'll see how things shape in the morning, and, till then, I'll trust in the star of my good fortune that never deserted me yet."

With these reflections Wilmot turned into bed, and in spite of the dangers that now enveloped him, slept soundly till morning. He got up at his usual hour, dressed with more than ordinary care, and went down to the breakfast room, closely followed, as it happened, by Mr. Brown.

Morton was there, having just finished his breakfast, and greeted them on entering.

" Ha, Mr. Wilmot, and you, my friend Brown, I see the dissipation of the night has not kept you in bed late, or spoiled

your appetite for breakfast. If there is one thing in the world that a man should wish for more than another, and value highly if he has got it, it is a good digestion. The consciousness of uprightness and honesty cannot give the satisfaction that it does, and the consolations of religion are not half so comforting. The possession of wealth is poor compensation if the digestion is impaired ; and the cares of life sit lightly when this is vigorous. A night of late feasting and unlimited champagne, such as you have just indulged in, gentlemen, would spoil my appetite for a week. This knowledge consoles me when I think that I am never likely to be the honoured guest of such an occasion—nobody would ever think of banqueting *me*, though I were preparing to leave the country. Ah ! what it is to be popular--to catch the people's favour, and have your praises sung by a discerning public. This recognition of your worth, Mr. Wilmot," he went on, "must afford you extreme gratification, now that you are about to leave Bloomsbury for a time, especially so, as you must feel that it is only your due—a slight, but well-earned recompense for the unselfish devotion to the interests of others, which, we may take it for granted, has always characterized your actions. Merit has so often to go unrewarded, neglected, or despised, that it is refreshing to meet with an exception in your case."

" My poor services to the public," Wilmot replied, " have, I fear, been overvalued ; my actions looked upon in a too favourable, too friendly light. I may be conscious of a wish, a desire, an aspiration to live not entirely for self ; to be of some little service, however small, to my fellow-creatures ; to the community, as here, in which I have had the privilege to dwell. But, after all, what can one achieve, what accomplish ? "

" A philanthropist at heart you must be, at least," Morton replied. "'The heart aye's the part that's either right or wrong.' Some of us, I believe, have formed quite a wrong

estimate of your character, Mr. Wilmot ; but we'll see you in your true light yet," he added, as he rose and went out.

After breakfast Wilmot wrote a long letter, and also sent a note over to Constable O'Flaherty, stating that he might require his presence at the Criterion, and asking him, if possible, to be in attendance and within call at ten o'clock, but without mentioning the particular purpose for which he required him. (Mr. Wilmot was a Justice of the Peace, and used to take his seat on the local Bench with much dignity on all possible occasions.) The constable, however, had received intimation from another quarter that his attendance was needed, and had, in fact, been keeping the hotel under his observation all the morning.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

PUNCTUAL to the hour appointed, Wilmot entered the sitting-room designated in Westall's note of the evening before, a comfortable, large, and well-furnished apartment, the same that Mrs. Ashwin and her daughter had made use of during their stay at the Criterion.

The room was already occupied. Westall was there, of course, but decently dressed now and looking quite a different person from the seedy individual who used to board at the Cosmopolitan. He was not quite recovered from his recent illness, and the past effects of dissipation were still visible in his face; but there was a resolve apparent there, a light in his eyes, an uprising to be seen of a better, stronger moral nature, which his features gave little evidence of when he first made the acquaintance of the reader.

Wilmot walked in with a firm step and confident bearing, casting a bold though careless glance around as he advanced into the room; then turned and bowed to the assembled company. Westall he expected to see, and he was not surprised to see Elwood and his daughter there, for he had noticed their arrival at the hotel a short time previously, and guessed their errand; but when his eye rested on Morton and Frank Ashwin, who also were there, he allowed a sharp look of surprise and displeasure to cross his features.

"Mr. Westall," he began, "in answer to the note which I received from you last evening, I am here to meet you—for what purpose I am at a loss to understand. At the same time,

I hardly expected that it was to, what one might call, a public meeting of this kind that my attendance was invited. Were it not for the presence of the lady," and he bowed to Miss Elwood, "one might suppose, from the fact of the gentlemen I see before me being here, that it is some question of agricultural or pastoral importance which we have met to discuss—the establishment of a farmers' club, a dairy factory, or something of the kind. However, let the object be what it may, I have no reason to shun publicity. But I should have thought that you, Westall—remembering what took place at our last meeting—would have sought an interview with me in strict privacy, if, indeed, you ventured to meet me at all."

"The gentlemen who are here," answered Westall, with some tremor in his voice, "are interested—one of them intensely interested—in that which brings us together. Richard Wilson, look at that old man there—old beyond his years—and say if you know who he is."

Elwood, as we may still call him, had been seated beside his daughter when Wilmot entered, and had eagerly and fixedly scanned the features of the man.

"It is he," he said, in a low voice only heard by his daughter; "it is my old partner, the cause of all my suffering."

At Westall's words he now rose and stood before the other. With no very great disparity in years, the contrast between them was strongly marked. Elwood, prematurely aged, his scanty hair whitened by the hand of affliction rather than by time, bowed and broken in body, the lines of care and sorrow deeply drawn on cheek and brow, stood a wrecked and marred likeness of what he might have been. Wilmot, on the other hand, erect, portly in form, his eye undimmed, fresh and florid in face, with but few lines there to mark the touch of time, stood in vigorous manhood, full of health, of the sap and springs of life—a well-preserved man with whom the world had dealt kindly.

When Wilmot looked on the face of the other, and met the

eyes of the man who had been made the victim of his crime, there might have been seen in his own a momentary irresolute shrinking, but only momentary; and as he turned again to Westall, it was with a bold front that he answered.

“If you address me,” he said—“though, in doing so, you have made a slight mistake in my name—I can only say that the gentleman is, I believe, a Mr. Elwood, a settler in this neighbourhood.”

“You are right so far,” replied Westall, “but in the man before you, you see also your former partner, Charles Hartland. He was no partner, however, as you know, in the felonies that you committed; and yet he was made to undergo the penalty for them, or for complicity in them.”

“What melodrama is this that we are brought here to rehearse?” asked Wilmot, with a loud, well-feigned laugh of incredulity. “How is the play to end? Is tragedy, or comedy, or a screaming farce to be the development of it? The elements of either, or all of these, seem ready at hand. It is pretty plain to me, however, that this fellow,” he went on, pointing at Westall, “for whom the police have been looking for some time, will make the acquaintance of the inside of the lock-up before many minutes have passed. I did not come here unprepared—Constable O’Flaherty is waiting to take him in charge. I admit that I made the fellow’s acquaintance before, to my cost, and was entrusted by his relations with a few pounds to dole out to him, just to keep him from starving. But this would not satisfy him. With revolver in hand, he must waylay me on a lonely road and demand my money or my life. I knew the scoundrel though he was disguised. Ha, O’Flaherty, here you are, and just in time,” he called out, as that officer looked in at the doorway, in the wake of Mr. Brown who had just entered, and seated himself not far from where Wilmot was standing—“take this man Westall in charge, constable; I

know you have been wanting to lay your hand on him for some time."

But the constable only answered with a broad grin.

"Hold a bit," said Morton, rising; "I know something about this attempted robbery business, and the charge is altogether unfounded. The assault was committed, not by Westall, but upon him. I happened to be out in the paddock on that evening close to where these two met, and could not help hearing something of what passed. Westall spoke in a low voice, but his expressed intention of righting some wrong and of making some disclosures reached me. Wilmot, in angry tones, spoke louder, and his words could not be mistaken. He cursed the other and the other's conscience, in that he refused to be bribed. I heard also the blow struck with the heavy hunting-whip, and Westall's consequent fall. I then jumped over the fence and ran towards them—in time, I believe, to prevent murder. In any case, Wilmot, on hearing my approach, galloped off towards the township. Westall was stunned, but soon recovered sufficiently for me to help him into my cottage, which was not far off. He told me something of the history of himself, of Wilmot, and of my neighbour Elwood, and of his determination to do all he could towards clearing the character of the latter. I believed him. I kept him concealed at my place for two or three days till he was able to travel, and then drove away in the middle of the night, and eventually reached Wellington with him without anyone being the wiser. I trusted him, and provided him with the funds for the journey home, which it was deemed advisable that he should take in order that he might make his disclosures at headquarters, and, if possible, collect further evidence of the innocence of Elwood. If you trust a man at all let him think that you trust him implicitly. If there is any good in him—and the chances are there isn't—it will bring it out. I didn't, however, take anyone into my confidence, not even—for a time at least—my neighbour, who

was most deeply concerned. If the man played me false there would be no one to call me a fool for my pains, and I could laugh at my own folly. But he did not deceive me. He has come back, and has done all he undertook to do. He has kept his promise, too, and has not, I believe, tasted drink since he left. It was not altogether by his desire that Mr. Brown, here, was his companion out from England. To remove, if possible, the felon stain from him who had suffered innocently was his purpose, and not, after this lapse of time, to bring to justice the guilty one—even though he might have a private wrong of recent date to avenge. Mr. Wilmot, or Wilson," Morton continued, addressing that gentleman, "our mutual friend here, Mr. Brown, is, as you may now guess, a detective from Scotland Yard, sent out here specially on your behalf, and, as I think I hinted on a previous occasion, will probably be your fellow-traveller to the Old Country."

Mr. Brown bowed his acquiescence in the truth of this from where he sat; and Wilmot in his heart cursed him and Morton and all concerned.

"This has been my share in the affair," Morton went on. "It hasn't been much, and I take no credit for it. The opportunity of doing anything was thrown in my way accidentally, and I should not, probably, have taken the course I did but for the chance offered of exposing another sham, of helping to strip the false respectability and pretence of worth and honesty from off this gentleman whom Bloomsbury delights to honour."

Wilmot had remained silent, gloom and anger gathering on his brow, but was now about to say something, when Westall spoke again :

"It is true what Mr. Morton has said. It was his timely presence that, perhaps, saved me from further injuries, or even death itself, at the hand of this man, who would now have me thrown into prison on a false charge, as he

before allowed his partner, an innocent man, to be. The misappropriation of funds," he went on, "was discovered by me some time before the crash came, but not to the full extent. I was weak, and listened to Wilson's promises of reimbursement. I believed his assurance that the moneys would soon be restored. Oh, that I had made known to Mr. Hartland the first defalcation as soon as I found it out! What misery it might have averted! My silence was used as a weapon against me when disclosure had at last become inevitable, and Wilson was preparing for flight. With plausible tongue and confident manner, he showed me that I must be arrested as an accomplice if I stayed, and that for me safety also lay in flight. Had I thought for a moment that my other employer, Mr. Hartland, who was always the soul of honour, could have, by any possibility, been implicated or involved, save in the financial ruin of the firm, I would have stood by him to clear him from the charge. But he too had just left the country for a time, all unconscious of the terrible blow that was falling. It was nearly two years afterwards when I learnt that he had been convicted of participation in the felonies of his partner, and was undergoing penal servitude in Australia. I had sunk then. I had again found Wilson, who was always my evil genius. In my want, and to my degradation, I had fingered his gold—he was never stingy with it. The establishment of the other's innocence, and the reversal of the sentence, seemed hopeless then, or a task too difficult to undertake. But remorse and sorrow never left me, though I tried to drown them in dissipation. At last, here in this strange place and strange manner brought face to face with the guilty and the guiltless—where even in his retirement the innocent could find no rest, recognised by one of the enforced and vile companions of his days of shame, taunted and exposed, the stain of the convict on him and his—I could no longer forbear from attempting to clear his

name as far as lay in my power. His innocence has now, I think, been made manifest, though it is in the power of him, the guilty one, who stands before us—and who, it seems, must even yet expiate his crime—to add his testimony in establishing that innocence. Ah, my dear master," continued Westall with deep feeling, addressing Mr. Elwood, "late, far too late, has come the vindication of your good name. On my knees before you would I plead for your forgiveness. Your long years of misery and shame might have been averted or shortened but for my weakness at first, my base cowardice afterwards."

Elwood had remained standing while Westall spoke. His daughter had risen also, and partly turning from the rest of the company, with her hand upon his, watched, with fond concern, the face she loved so well, anxious for the effect which the meeting with his former partner, the words he listened to, and the excitement of the interview, might have upon him.

The old man, in answer to Westall's appeal for forgiveness, now spoke for the first time.

"You are freely forgiven, Westall," he said. "I, who have been weak and overtrustful, how can I, to human frailty, deny forgiveness? The reparation which you now make, cannot, it is true, undo the past, but it will soften the effects of it. To you, Richard Wilson, it is a harder task to extend pardon. I do not wonder that at first you should have failed to recognise in me the man, your former partner, who, in the strength of manhood's early prime, parted from you on that memorable day so many years ago, when, at the moment in which you were preparing to escape, loaded with plunder, from the clutches of the law, you gave your hand to him, with a smile on your face and a jest on your tongue, wishing him a journey of pleasure, when you knew he would be overtaken on it by a very thunderclap of unsuspected ruin and crash of desolation. Only God and your own conscience know if the misleading train of evidence—slight though it was—which you left behind,

was wilfully and intentionally laid for the purpose of incriminating me. Yet, as I look to heaven for forgiveness—a sinner before his God—so do I even now forgive you. I could wish and hope that the years of shame and suffering, which I endured, might have atoned for the crime that was yours. Surely the punishment, undergone by the innocent, might be held to make expiation for the misdeeds of the real criminal. It will be no satisfaction to me to know that retribution has overtaken you. It will be grief indeed to me to think that you are made to lead the life that I was forced to lead ; to suffer what I suffered—less keenly though you might feel the degradation, but without the consciousness of innocence to sustain you, and supported by the devotion ad unquenchable love of a noble wife, which upheld me. I have not sought to bring this upon you after all these years. To free my name from the stigma of crime, to have my innocence declared before the world—above all, to remove the shame and reproach which my children inherited as a consequence of their father's felon stain, has been an object longed for, prayed for, and yet well-nigh despaired of. If, happily, that object is to be gained now, it was not intended or desired, by me at least, that in the achievement of it, your punishment should be involved. May God deal with you in mercy."

Wilmet had stood, apparently but little moved by the revelations of Westall or by the words of Elwood. Gloomy thoughts and conflicting emotions were, however, passing in his mind. The game was up. A brazen front, a bold denial of his identity with the person against whom the charges were made, and of the circumstances connected with them, would avail him but little now. He had intended, when he entered the room, to take his course—to defy Westall, and laugh at his accusations, have him arrested on the old charge of attempted highway robbery ; and he himself walk out a free man, prepared to leave the country with all secrecy and despatch. But the presence of the detective,

armed with the warrant for his arrest, barred that contemplated door of escape from his difficult and dangerous position To get away was no longer possible.

Arrest, restraint, the voyage home as a prisoner, the cell, the dock, the trial, the sentence with the penal years to follow — all stood out before him as inevitable consequences now; for he had no doubt that the police, once they had him in the clutches of the law, would be able to bring the charge; home to him, and secure his conviction. He had ever taken the road in life that offered greatest present pleasure, and, when it changed to a rough and toilsome track, he felt the greater repugnance to follow it. Looking, too, at Elwood, and listening to his words in which there was little of reproach but much of good-will and forgiveness, some degree of pity and remorse perhaps touched him. It was with less than his usual assurance, and in a more subdued tone, that he now spoke.

“Gentlemen, and this fair lady who graces the room with her presence,” he said, bowing low to Miss Elwood, “I may, I suppose, be permitted to say a few words on my part: though perhaps the gentlemen who seem to have arranged everything so carefully for the production of this piece, would prefer that I should remain a silent, though interested, spectator. Mr. Brown has, it is said, a warrant for my arrest, or for the arrest of someone—not me at all, perhaps—that remains to be proved. May I ask him to show me his warrant, and to make plain his intention.”

“My intention,” replied Brown, handing the warrant to Wilmot, “admits of no doubt. It is to arrest you, Richard Wilson, alias Wilmot, as I now do, on the authority of that warrant, and convey you at Her Majesty’s expense a prisoner to London, there to answer the charges therein set forth. I ought, perhaps, to have made the arrest immediately on my arrival here, but I promised to wait for Westall, and allow of this meeting.”

“One moment,” said Wilmot, looking at the warrant; “I see this is in due form. Give me leave to say a few words, and then I shall be at your service. It were easy for me, and perhaps wisest, to deny all knowledge of this business; and your Scotland Yard authorities might find it difficult to prove my connection with it. But I prefer to take another and a bolder course. I am the man described in this warrant—which allow me, Mr. Brown, to hand back to you. This gentleman here, known as Mr. Elwood, is Mr. Charles Hartland, a former partner in business with me. There were some peccadillos committed in connection with the firm—I need not enter into details now—and for alleged complicity in them he was, I believe, tried, convicted, and served a sentence of penal servitude. Gentlemen, and you, fair lady, whose sweet face—now that I have looked on it closely, reminds me of one I knew in the long ago—of complicity in these peccadillos, or felonies as the law called them, Mr. Hartland was entirely guiltless. They were my work and mine alone. He was, certainly, somewhat remiss in his attention to business at that time and did not exercise the closest scrutiny, else I, his partner, and junior partner, had not been able to carry on the game to the extent I did. Westall, here, did discover that there was something wrong, and afterwards profited by the knowledge; and if keeping guilty silence constitutes complicity, he ought to go into the dock also. But Hartland was altogether innocent and ignorant of what was being done. These things happened many years ago—a few bankers and others who could afford the loss, were minus some of their funds. Westall found me here, the past buried, occupying a position not without honour and respect, in the enjoyment of the confidence of my fellow men, and not thought unworthy of the offer of a larger measure of that confidence. Westall, a sneak, weak and unprincipled by nature and habit of life—in spite of his protestations now—found me here, and sponged on me, till his conscientious

scruples—ha, ha!—got the better of him. It is willed now, you say, that I must leave as a shamed prisoner this place where my name and actions were lately held worthy of praise. But I have something to bring forward yet ere this is done. Charles Hartland's name will now be cleared from dishonour and reproach. If further testimony is needed from me, it will be found in this letter which I wrote this morning.” And Wilmot placed an open letter on the table. “But,” he proceeded, “I also have a quittance in my case ready for signature, a legal discharge drawn up in due form, and I will now produce it.”

And, quick as thought, Wilmot drew a revolver from his pocket, turned it against his breast, and fired. The bullet, as intended, would have pierced his heart had not Brown, who had been keenly watching him, sprang forward on the instant and struck the weapon downward on the instant of discharge. The wound inflicted, though not instantly fatal, was a very serious one, the ball having entered his side and gone through the lung. Wilmot staggered a moment and then fell heavily into the arms of Brown and Morton, who had leaped forward to his assistance. As they laid him down he muttered, “Curse your interference, Brown—you have spoiled my sign-manual.”

CHAPTER XL.

THERE was a bedroom adjoining, which, besides the door leading directly into the passage, had also another opening into the sitting-room in which they were assembled, and into it they carried him and laid him on the bed, while medical aid was instantly sent for. The tragic termination of their meeting appalled and horrified the inmates of the room, Miss Elwood naturally most of all. Frank Ashwin was at her side in an instant, and led her from the apartment, along with her father, who was also much agitated. The house was thrown into confusion. Powlet and his wife were quickly on the scene, and anxious, hurried questions given and replied to. "A bad business, a bad business," was all the comment Bob could make; while Mrs. Powlet (whom Bob had taken into his confidence late the previous night), after seeing that the wounded man was receiving all the attention possible, could not forbear saying:

"A bad business, indeed—I should think it was. This is what comes of your secret doings, Bob Powlet, and you, Mr. Morton. Leave the men alone for making a blunder, if it's possible to do it."

"It is an unforseen ending, no doubt, Mrs. Powlet," Morton said, "and I am sorry for it—though I am inclined to think better of the man, by reason of it, than I did before. There was no pretence about the manner of departure that he tried to bring about."

"If it had been God's will," Mrs. Powlet said, "I could

have wished that his manner of departure had been different. We little thought last night, at the dinner to him here, that this would be his way of going. But we may pull him round yet, and we'll do all we can here for him, at any rate. Mr. Wilmot has been in this house for years now—since it was opened, almost—and a better conducted gentleman never entered it. I'll speak of him as I have found him. What you have raked up against him now, with your scheming and plotting, I don't well know, and I don't want to know—it isn't proved yet, I suppose—but he has lived among us this many a day, and hasn't done wrong to anyone in Bloomsbury that I ever heard of. A personable gentleman, too."

"Don't say another word to her," Powlet whispered to Morton. "Let a woman have a free rein and she'll soon pull up of her own accord. Never contradict 'em, never contradict 'em."

"A fine pass you have let things come to, Powlet," his wife went on—"here's a decent gentleman takes his own life, or next door to it—and the house 'll get a bad name through it, too, I suppose. It's a mercy somebody else wasn't shot as well. But here comes the doctor, and we'll soon hear what he says; and I must go out now and see to the poor young lady that must have been frightened to death nearly." And Mrs. Powlet hastened out, with kindly intent.

She found Miss Elwood, with her father and Ashwin, in the corridor, and conducted them into a private room, where she insisted on having a glass of wine brought up for the young lady and for the old man, both of whom, already deeply moved by what had previously taken place at the interview, were, indeed, very much shocked and overcome by the terrible incident which had marked its close.

"Oh, Mr. Ashwin, do you think he will die?" asked Miss Elwood, in deep concern.

Frank, who, truth to tell, was agitated by other emotions besides those of pity and sorrow which he felt for the wounded

man, could only express the hope that the self-inflicted injury might not prove fatal.

He had listened with intense interest to the revelations made at the interview, and had understood then, with grateful feelings, why it was that Morton had pressed him to attend. He had watched with eager eyes every movement of the girl he loved, every change of expression on her face which so readily reflected the emotions of the heart; and though no answering look met his—for her soul seemed wrapt up in concern for her father—yet he felt that he was no longer shut out from hope, that the obstacle which lately seemed insurmountable was now about to be removed, that, at least, the opportunity of wooing, perhaps winning, the woman of his choice would no longer be denied him.

“Poor Wilson,” Elwood said sadly, “it has been a tragic ending to his career—an ending, in a sense, even though recovery should lift him up from where he lies. The charge must even then be met, I suppose, and the arrest maintained with all its after consequences. He made amends, too, to me: and declared my innocence of complicity in his crime almost with the latest breath he drew before committing the dreadful deed. My name and character have at last been cleared—I trust legally and fully—I do not yet know the nature and extent of Westall’s evidence. My children no longer lie under the shadow of their father’s shame. Ah, Mr. Ashwin, for myself, an old man verging to the grave, this late acknowledgment of the wrong done me, though pleasing to me, of course, matters in truth but little. To the land where wrongs are righted and hidden things made plain, I must soon have gone: but on behalf of those whom I should leave behind, dear, very dear, to me has been the desire for restitution, and with deep thankfulness do I accept it. But it is mine at heavy cost. Poor Wilson! retribution has found him at last, and brought him down.”

Ashwin then went to learn the state of the sufferer, and what the professional opinion of his case was. He soon

returned with the intelligence that the doctor gave some hope that the patient might ultimately recover, provided no dangerous complications arose ; but the case was serious, very serious. The ball had passed through the lower portion of the lung, and the doctor had not been able to extract it.

Morton came back with Ashwin, and talked a few minutes with Miss Elwood and her father on the all-absorbing subject, and not without some commiseration, expressed in his caustic way, for the man lying near. But when he went out of the room, followed almost immediately by Ashwin, and was passing downstairs, he said to himself :

“ Marriage will be the outcome of this. And so it still goes on—the love tale and the last sigh, and youth philandering by a new-made grave ; the funeral dirge and the wedding bells ; the dying couch and the bridal bed—the interminable incongruity of things, over which one hardly knows whether to laugh or weep.”

When it was known that Wilmot—as we may still call him—might linger on for days, or, indeed, haply, eventually recover ; and a competent nurse had been procured to take charge of the sick room, Miss Elwood expressed the wish to her father that she might be allowed to share in the duties of waiting on the wounded man and watching by him.

“ He has been the cause of much wrong and misery to you,” she said, “ but it might ease his sufferings, and lighten, perhaps, his last hours, if so be that he must die, to see me, your daughter, near his bed, and to feel that he was forgiven.”

“ May God bless you, Maud,” her father said. “ Carry out the dictates of your own true heart.”

And so it was that Miss Elwood was installed as assistant, taking some of the lighter duties, and watching near the sufferer when the nurse took necessary rest.

When Wilmot awoke out of a troubled sleep and found her beside his bed, it was with a pleased expression on his face that he greeted her, speaking painfully and with laboured breath.

"You here," he murmured. "This is kindness, to recompense me thus. Your face is like your mother's. Ah! I remember hers still. I knew her before she was married—and loved her. You did not know this, I suppose. My life would have been different, had she linked it with hers, perhaps—who knows? I might have made hers wretched. She chose a worthier mate."

And as another day passed, and another arrived, he still sought eagerly for her presence, and appeared more restful and less feverish when she was near him. Alarming symptoms now appeared, and the doctor at length held out no hope.

Wilmot was perfectly conscious of his condition, and, indeed, from the first seemed to expect with certainty a fatal termination.

"I have been here long enough—too long," he said. "I have picked the sweets of life after my fashion, and should not like now to be forced to taste the bitter."

When it was known that his recovery was hopeless, that his hours were numbered and few, the visiting clergyman, who happened to be holding service in the township that day, for it was Sunday, expressed a wish to see him, and called in the afternoon for that purpose. But Wilmot refused bluntly, and said to Miss Elwood, through whom the request had been conveyed :

"I will die as I have lived, without the help of priest or parson. You only, if I want one, must be confessor and spiritual adviser."

And some little time afterwards, as if his thoughts had been dwelling on the subject, he said to her, slowly and with difficulty :

"If you like, Maud,"—he had begun to call her by her Christian name—"if you like, you can sing me a hymn or two—some of the old ones that I may have heard when a boy; I forget them now. It might please you—women are usually more devout—and not harm me."

There was a piano in the adjoining sitting-room, and Miss

Elwood, as desired, sang, in low sweet voice, but in clear and feeling tones, some of the old favourites, such as she deemed best suited to the need of the dying man, and then to an air of soft and plaintiff melody, rising at last into stronger chords that breathed of effort and of hope, the following lines :

Lowly lying,
Slowly dying,
Yet defying
Death's decree ;

Night is falling,
Justice calling ;
Gloom appalling
Hangs o'er thee.

Christ is pleading,
Interceding ;
Once hung, bleeding,
On the tree.

“Till life sever,
Weak endeavour,
Bootless never,
Sought for me.”—

Love is speaking ;
Day is breaking—
Succour seeking,
Sinner flee.

He died the same night. He had made his will on the previous day ; and in it he had bequeathed all he died possessed of to the daughter of his former partner. But she never touched the legacy. The most of his property had been converted into cash ; and Miss Elwood, with her father's approval, realised upon the remainder, and transmitted the whole, a large sum, to England, there to be divided amongst the creditors who had been defrauded so many years before, or amongst their representatives.

Wilmot had also signed a dying declaration, duly attested, in which Elwood's character was vindicated and his innocence made clear.

CHAPTER XLI.

FRANK ASHWIN had appeared to take a great interest in the state of the wounded man, and each day, and more than once in the day, had made enquiries concerning him, not apparently satisfied till he had received an assurance from the lips of the fair assistant nurse herself.

Miss Elwood returned home on the morning following Wilmot's death; and it was two or three days afterwards when Ashwin called. It was a bright afternoon in autumn—the most enjoyable season of the year in New Zealand. Subject less frequently than the spring to abrupt changes of weather, and to the boisterous winds often prevalent then over a great part of the country, the autumn, in growth and verdure renewed after the summer heat, brings with it a second spring-like charm, tempered and impressed, indeed, by the sense of the near approach again of winter, but coloured also by the knowledge of assured returns from orchard and from field. In the bush districts, the new "burns," thickly strewn with timber, lie at first black and uninviting to the eye—soon, however, to be clothed in the richest green, as the young grass springs up under the influence of the autumnal rains. There may still be a faint smoky haze visible in the atmosphere, the result of smouldering stump and log, and of the piled-up fires of the settler bent on clearing his ground—just enough smoke in the air to lend apparent additional distance to the wooded range, or to dull into a glowing red the sun's broad disc as it sinks into the west.

Ashwin found Miss Elwood in the garden, tending to her flower-beds. She blushed a little as she answered his greeting and felt his look of love upon her face; while he, on his part, seemed somewhat constrained in manner, and nervous. He spoke of the weather, made some allusion to the work on which she was engaged, and asked after her father and Ted—but all in a half-hearted sort of way, as if some other thought held paramount possession of his mind. He suggested then that they should walk over to the orchard to see what apples still hung on the young trees—for they had borne fruit this season—as he said he should like one.

She answered, as they moved away, in reply to his enquiries, that her father was well, but was enjoying an afternoon nap just then, she thought; and that Ted had received his lessons for the day, and had gone out somewhere.

“He is really getting beyond my control as a teacher, I am afraid,” she said, “and ought to be under a master. If we remain here, we think of sending him to one of the collegiate schools shortly; but I should miss him very much. He has now, I think, gone back to find Jim, who is sowing grass seed somewhere.”

“Yes,” replied Ashwin, in tender tones, bending towards her. “Jim is sowing seed over the ground that was burnt by that terrible fire in January, when you risked your life for me.” And then, all restraint vanishing, he unburdened his heart.

“Beloved one,” he said, “I have come to know my fate. Had I been more worthy of your love I might have come to ask for it with less fear and trepidation, lest it be denied. I have made avowal of my love for you already. I have pleaded with you—too warmly and persistently, perhaps—for some return, for some little encouragement, at a time when you felt that you were debarred from affording me any. The barrier,

which at one time you held to be insurmountable, but which I would have treated as straw, as a thing to be made light of and despised, has now been removed. I have spoken to your father, and he was generous enough to say kind things of me, and to offer no opposition to my suit, deeply conscious though he was, as I am, of the value of the treasure which he was willing that I should make mine. I have come again to ask for it. Dearest one, do not now forbid me to hope. Give me at least the privilege of trying to win your love."

The cunning fellow had led her along a shelter belt of macrocarpa trees, now grown to sufficient height to screen them from view. With downcast look and warm blushes mantling over face and neck, she listened to his impassioned words, till, in answer to his last appeal for permission to try to win her, she raised her eyes, with the love-light in them, to meet his, and said softly, "My love is yours already."

He had his arms around her on the instant; and then there came to them the rapture of the first sweet long-drawn contact of loving lips.

She told him how she had loved him for a long time—since the day, indeed, in which he sat and listened to the recital of her father's wrongs, and showed his trust in the old man's truth and honesty; how she had tried to banish his image from her heart. "But it was a hopeless task," she said, her bright face looking up into his, "for you had a persevering way with you, and would not let me forget you."

What could he do—what could mortal man do under the circumstances—but take her in his arms again, and kiss the lips that had made so sweet a confession?

After a little, when they were about to return to the house, she said with a smile, "You have forgotten the apple that you came for," and then, stepping lightly over to a tree where a few still hung, she picked one, and gave it to him. Had it

been Paradise's forbidden fruit, with all the dread consequences hanging to it, he would have taken and tasted it.

When they reached the house, the old man met them on the verandah, and saw at once what had happened, as his daughter flew to him and put her arms about his neck, crying through the coming tears, "You will not go from us—we will not part from you—I could not leave you lonely."

Her father was much affected also, and could only say, in a broken voice, "God bless you. May God's blessings be upon you both. Mr. Ashwin, be kind to her, be worthy of her."

"I cannot promise to be wholly worthy of her," Ashwin replied; "but if kindness, devotion, and never-dying love can make her life happy, they shall be hers."

They had much to talk about, and Frank Ashwin walked into the house with them, the proudest, happiest man that day within a hundred miles of Bloomsbury.

CHAPTER XLII., AND LAST.

THIS narrative is nearing its close. A brief renewal of acquaintance, at a somewhat later date, with the characters who have figured in it, may be acceptable to the reader; and if that important, and, let us hope, not over-critical personage will look in on Bloomsbury society a year after the events last recorded, his or her curiosity may be satisfied. The township itself has increased in population and importance. Private dwellings have gone up, and several new places of business have been erected. Here, as elsewhere in New Zealand of later years, the competition amongst tradespeople, and amongst professional men, has kept well abreast—often, indeed, in advance—of the requirements of the community.

There are complaints heard occasionally, even here, of dull times; but the township is making steady progress, and its stability is assured. An agency of another bank has been established; and a young lawyer has deemed Bloomsbury to be a place where his legal acumen and forensic ability could be exercised with advantage, and has opened an office here. The report was lately current, also, that Joe Ivess was about to start a second newspaper in this rising centre—much to the dismay of its business men, who, in that event, would be compelled, in self defence, to advertise in both.

Mr. and Mrs. Powlet are still to be found at the Criterion, the reputation of which as a well-conducted hostelry has not diminished. They are still in accord in most things—in other words, Mrs. Powlet has still very much her own way, for Bob's confidence in the worth and wisdom of his wife is as un-

bounded as ever. On one subject only did they lately differ in opinion, and that was the question of extending the franchise to women. Mrs. Powlet scouted the proposal.

“Franchise, indeed!” she said. “Give them the franchise! Let them stop at home and mind their babies—if they have got any—and make their firesides comfortable, and their homes happy—they’ll find plenty to do there—instead of running about to meetings, and bothering their heads about polities. Politics, indeed! They’ll make a fine mess of politics, if they get their hands in. It’s little good the men do with politics, as far as I see; but it’ll be a deal worse if the women get the vote. They’ll send to Parliament a pretty lot of wheedlin’ nincompoops that’ll promise them all sorts of things, and make the men out to be reg’lar tyrants. And when they’ve been at their politics for a while, they’ll be spouting at every meeting, and troop to the polls, and jostle the men, and tout for votes, as bold as brass. That’s what it’ll come to with their franchise; and little good for themselves they’ll get out of it in any way, in the long run.”

Powlet, on the other hand, was altogether in favour of the change.

“Give ‘em the vote by all manner of means,” he said, as he stood one night with his back to the fire in the Commercial Room. “There’s a lot of sense in women,” he went on, “a lot of sense in women. Their feelin’s get the better of ‘em at times, to be sure—and they mayn’t be able to explain things out, you know, so as to convince a man; but it’s ten to one they’re in the right of it for all that. I’m open to bet that my wife ’ll see through most things, and get to the bottom and the right and wrong of them before a good many of your men ’ll have begun to scratch their heads and think about it. A lot of gaol-birds and drunken loafers must have a vote and send men to Parliament, and women like her have no say in the matter. There’s neither rhyme nor reason in it. Why, it’s the wives that keep a roof over the heads of half the lazy raga-

muffins and noisy ne'er-do-wells that one sees and hears so much of at election times."

"But the women," said Spalding, "won't be content till they get into Parliament, themselves."

"And why shouldn't they?" Bob answered, warmly. "If they couldn't turn out as good laws as the men are doing, it would be a queer thing, and I don't think they could turn 'em out much faster. Not but," he went on, musingly—"Not but I'm doubtful how the thing would work. If we could give them and the men turn and turn about at the law-making, it might answer right enough—the men a session by themselves; and then the women a session, with, maybe, Sir Maurice in the chair, just to steady them a bit. But," he added, "it would never do to mix 'em in the House—it would never do to mix 'em."

Jacob Brasch is still making money in the *Cosmopolitan*, but the whisky-still is idle. He has had O'Byrne's section transferred to himself, but he has not been able, as yet, to find the person whom he would care to trust with the secret of the still and the management of it. He did think, at first, of entrusting Heskett with it, but he found that he was too helplessly a slave to drink. Jacob is still on the look out for a suitable partner to work the concern; and there is an opening here for a reliable man, with some knowledge of the business. He keeps Heskett still, and employs him in a menial capacity about the hotel.

"Powlet is more better ables as me to keep his poor relations," he says—"but some peoples have no likings for a man ven he is down."

Mrs. Powlet believes that it is only out of spite that her daughter's disreputable husband is kept there; and never sees the fellow slouching about the township but she is tempted to give him the weight of her tongue, but refrains.

"He never dare darken our door," she says, "Powlet would knock him down if he did."

Her daughter, poor woman, tries to be as miserable as she well can, and has still a hankering after her brutal, good-for-nothing husband. It is even said that she has met him on the sly once or twice for a minute, and given him money.

O'Byrne is working hard on contract and other jobs, a long way from here, and is sticking to what he earns. He has never visited Bloomsbury since he left it after Old Dan's death. Molly left it not long afterwards, and is living not very far from where he is working. He has lately applied for a section in a newly opened block of bush land in that district, and as Molly still remains true to him, and has saved a nice little sum herself, it is more than likely that, in a snug little home in the bush, before many years are past, he will have taken her to his heart for good and all.

If, during the year, there has been marked progress in the township of Bloomsbury itself, in the country around it the evidences of solid improvement are perhaps even more striking. Roads have stretched their long arms still further into the bush, and metalling has been done on some of them. Where, a year or two ago, the settler in winter time had to plunge along on horseback through almost impassable mud in order to reach his home, he will now be able to bowl along in trap or buggy, and will have become captious over a rut. Another bush-burning season has passed, and, as from hillside or valley the pillar of smoke rose high and clear and well-defined, with many curling involutions, the spirits of the settler rose with it, under the conviction that his "burn" was a good one. New fences have gone up in all directions, and the neat wooden cottage has in many places supplanted the slab hut.

Out in the Aratahi Block, where a newly-formed road has at length reached, one of these cottages may be seen—a substantial four-roomed one, with a verandah to it. There is some display of taste shown about the place in the laying out of garden ground and in the planting of trees. This

work had evidently been done a season or two previously in anticipation of the dwelling being where it is. Neatness is exhibited, and comfort provided for in the arrangement of dairy, milking shed and yards, and in the surroundings of the house generally.

It is here that Maurice M'Keown has prevailed upon her who was Mary Robinson to take up her abode, and Mary is not dissatisfied with the change.

It was about eight or nine months previously, one night as Maurice and Frank Ashwin were seated by the fire, and the latter's approaching marriage was alluded to, that M'Keown said:

“I am thinking of entering the blessed state myself very soon.”

Ashwin, himself under the spell, complimented him on the wisdom of the decision he had come to.

“A sensible step, Maurice,” he said. “You are not going to wait for a year or two, then, as you once thought you would have to do. But I shall be sorry to lose you for all that.”

“Well,” Maurice replied, “a long courtship sometimes means labour lost. Delays are dangerous in matrimonial matters as well as in other things, and it isn't safe to put off the wedding-day too long. If the girl isn't much to look at, a fellow may be safe in holding back a bit—if he thinks he had better earn a few pounds more before he gets spliced—but if she's good looking above the common, it's wiser for him to get the knot tied as soon as he can. Well, Mary is willing to go up on the section with me as soon as I can get a house up; and her father has promised to give us half a dozen cows, so that, with the stock I have on the place now, we'll be able to make a start. A married man,” he went on, in a more serious tone of voice than was usual with him, “a married man must expect his expenses to mount up a bit. It's, maybe, something like lighting a fire among the logs on a windy day in summer time—you hardly know

where it'll stop. I expect, in the course of nature and God's providence, there'll be some sturdy lads and bonny lasses to make the house lively—as I have no doubt there will be in your own case, Mr. Frank—but I must do my best to keep the pot boiling."

Ashwin smiled, and said, "I have no fear, Maurice, of your not succeeding. You are made of the right stuff for a successful colonist."

"I can knock down the rest of the bush myself, at any rate," Maurice continued; "and if there is any work to be got near home, I might take a job by contract now and again—though I'll have plenty to do on my own place, and most of my neighbours round about there are too hard-up as it is, and would like to take a job themselves, if they could get one. It's a fine thing to give a poor man a chance to get a piece of land on easy terms, but too many hard-ups together will never make a do of it."

And so it came about that there was a wedding at Robinson's in the spring. Big George was invited, and came; and it was then that he made the discovery—hitherto, apparently, undreamt of—that Bessie, just unfolding into womanhood, was a remarkably nice girl, with a strong resemblance to her sister; and since that day he has become, in his bashful way, a frequent visitor. Bessie, in her secret heart, has begun to look with pleasure for his coming, and there is always a hearty greeting for him from her father, and the kindest of welcomes from her mother, who likes him for himself, but her warmest feelings of regard are his, in that he was the tried friend and trusted mate of her long lost boy who now lies under the sod.

Frank Ashwin has attained the consummation of his heart's desire, and has made Maud Hartland his wife. They live for the present in her old home, and will probably continue to reside there till Edwin, who is at school in Wellington now, comes of age, and can take possession. But on Ashwin's

place preparations are being made for extensive planting and laying-out of grounds round the home that is to be. There, it is understood, her father will accompany them when the time comes, if his gentle spirit has not previously laid down the burden of an enfeebled frame. But a lighter step and increased cheerfulness seem now to point to length of days.

Westall has found a resting place from his wanderings here also. He lives by himself in a small cottage, erected for him some little distance in the rear, and finds light work to do in the garden and on the farm.

Laura did not attend her brother's wedding, but her mother and sister did, and went back loud in praises of Frank's bonny bride.

Ponsonby has not yet developed into a large landed proprietor, and, until he does, the visits which he now finds frequent excuse for making to Harefield are not likely to excite more serious feelings in Miss Ashwin's breast than those with which she now amuses herself in listening to his fulsome flattery, and accepting his undisguised admiration and persevering attentions.

And Morton?—Morton still leads very much his old manner of life. But those who know him best say that he shows less bitterness of spirit than of yore, though caustic still in his denunciations of all pretence and insincerity. His distrust and hatred of woman has been tempered by intercourse with one whom he credits with all the virtues. Ashwin's is the only family where he visits, and though he may often be found there, and makes no secret of the admiration and regard which he entertains for Frank's wife, yet no tinge of jealousy will ever darken the peace of mind of her husband.

THE END.

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